

THE WONKY WHEEL

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

GARY
HUME

THE
WONKY
WHEEL

With an essay by Graham Bader





Gary Hume Paints a Picture

Graham Bader

Gary Hume has made some new works: delicately constructed, lusciously colored paintings in gloss paint on aluminum, and sculptures of welded and painted metal. The sculptures, a series of somewhat shabby wheel-like forms, resemble abandoned wagon or ship parts, remnants of an exploration gone awry. The paintings, their taut and reflective color fields separated by light-catching ridges, look good enough to eat: this viewer, at first glance, was tempted to unpeel their shallow relief surfaces and lick their vibrant gloss.

Hume's constructions and images appear almost entirely abstract, as a series of elegantly rendered and irregularly configured geometric forms. They're not, at least not entirely. The artist has never strayed far from figuration, and these newest works are no different: his primary starting point for the motifs in the series was a set of the most historically specific and intensely charged photographs imaginable — scenes of grief, killing, political speechifying, and the crudely grandiose celebration of national pride and loss. I'll examine these source images a bit later in this essay, and then only with hesitation. For such generative material, Hume insists, only functions in his practice as a catalogue of potential forms, a series of shapes and configurations in which narrative content — *what* his found images portray — is of no ostensible interest. As the artist described his process to Ulrich Loock, "The original image is only there to allow the painting to exist."¹ Or later in the same discussion: "I'm only interested in the shape and not the line, [and] this means that things distort without my intention. I forget what they are."²

Fair enough. Hume's paintings and sculptures, to be sure, are archetypes of material particularity — of the interplay of surface, edge, and color — rather than any kind of demonstrative illustration. But the divide between form and content, we know, is never so neatly maintained. Indeed, right after (or before) Hume disavows any interest in the social meaning of his source material, he'll talk widely about just this: the context in which he first encountered his starting images, the stories and associations they raise for him, the broader cultural significance they suggest. He'll also discuss in narrative terms his works and the process of creating them, describing the former as seemingly animate beings and the latter as something akin to a lovers' quarrel.³

There's a paradox to all of this, as Hume readily admits. What does it mean to work from source material whose narrative content you are both compelled by and programmatically disinterested in? Further, what happens to the seed of that content when it is radically transformed, made all but unrecognizable, in paintings and sculptures whose singularity of form overwhelms any specific pictorial genealogy? Is narrative dissolved in its transformation into form? Is form indelibly bound to the narrative traces contained within it? And to what degree can the artist direct the terms of this relationship?

Put most bluntly, these questions all boil down to this: What do we see when we look at Gary Hume's work? The artist himself will answer and ask this question in

turn, describing his recent images as history paintings but then quickly wondering if the things he works through in their production — “It’s all nonsense,” he’ll repeat — are even significant for their final form. Of his oeuvre more broadly, he says, “They are pictures, and I don’t know what they are.”⁴ Well, let me take a stab at answering this query. For one thing, Hume’s latest paintings and sculptures are *objects*. For another, they are *pictures*, images of something beyond themselves. And, obliquely but definitively, they are *subjects* as well: quasi-animate beings, staring down the artist in his studio and then addressing the rest of us from the walls and spaces they subsequently fill. Most essentially, these works are a meeting ground for all three of these defining elements: they are objects that are also images, and they address us with the force and singularity of autonomous beings. But none of this says much until we look at the details of Hume’s work and process themselves. So let us do that, with an eye to the artist’s own primary question: *Just what are these things?*

I.

First of all, Hume’s works are painted metal slabs and welded and assembled forms. Which is to say, objects. Or better, to borrow Donald Judd’s storied term, *specific objects*.⁵

What, then, are the specifics? In the case of his paintings, Hume begins with sketches on translucent sheets, loosely derived from his photographic sources, which are projected and traced upon the works’ aluminum supports. These supports are then laid flat so that he can apply his viscous and heavy paint to the contiguous fields he has mapped out upon them, each bounded from the other with weather stripping to prevent seepage. For these most recent works, he used Dulux Trade High Gloss paint, an industrial-strength product aimed at apartment managers and homeowners rather than artists. Dulux’s cans — dozens of which line the shelves in Hume’s London studio — celebrate the paint’s “exceptional gloss level” and coverage of up to eighteen square meters per liter; the company’s promotional materials praise the paint’s particular suitability for coating hot-water pipes and radiators.⁶ Hume’s primary material, in other words, is geared not to the making of images but to the protective covering of the most utilitarian of things: from pipes and radiators to, we can imagine, doors, grates, and window casings.

As the varied thicknesses of Hume’s surfaces betray, he applies anywhere from one to six layers of Dulux Trade High Gloss in each of his bounded fields. These coats then require about a day of drying time between them, during which a work-in-progress remains on its horizontal perch and the artist himself can turn his attention to other unfinished images. The process by which Hume works, then, is one of gradual build-up, stroke by careful stroke, and a constant back and forth between table and wall as he gauges his paintings’ progress with each individual round of drying. The



Brice Marden, *Three Deliberate Greys for Jasper Johns*, 1970. Oil and beeswax on canvas (three panels).
6 x 12 feet; 1.8 x 3.8 m. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

works, as he describes them, emerge *out from* his supports rather than simply on them; they take shape as material facts rather than nascent images. His choice of Dulux Trade High Gloss thus makes perfect sense — for if his variable surfaces are not quite those of an oft-coated radiator, they are equally blunt in their declarative objecthood, their explicit status as a construction of layer upon layer of thickly laid strokes. Hume makes pictures, we could say, that stare back at us as *things*.

Much the same has been observed of the paintings of Jasper Johns and Brice Marden, whose encaustic surfaces, in their matte stillness, foreground both their construction and their heft as objects. Max Kozloff, writing on the occasion of Johns's 1964 Jewish Museum retrospective, described the artist's process as having "demote[d] paint to the status of a mere covering" and thus rendering it, in the best materialist fashion, a "palpable *interference* to meaning and metaphor."⁷ Similarly, the evident *madness* of Marden's images was particularly striking for Hume when he first encountered them up close. "I thought that was fucking marvelous," he later enthused, "that you could actually see it had been made by a real person."⁸ Of course Hume's surfaces, brightly colored and vividly reflective, are something altogether different from each of these earlier models. His paintings don't absorb light, as do the encaustic planes of Johns and Marden, but send it right back at us. Placement, accordingly, is crucial: Hume's images' appearance — which is to say, what they seem to be — changes dramatically depending on their position vis-à-vis viewers and surrounding light sources. Colors shift. Bright glares and shadows emerge. Reflected

objects and vistas (and of course people) appear and disappear in turn. These effects are intensified in Hume's most recent works by the dramatically raised edges that divide their surfaces. More pronounced than any in his production to date, these ridges create sinuous and continually shifting networks of shadow and reflection across his images' faces.

This mutability of surface, Hume proudly proclaims, has earned him the constant enmity of publishers faced with the task of reproducing his work. For how does one duplicate an image that shifts with each turn of the head? And which reproduction, finally — the reddish one with a reflected figure in it, say, or the greenish one with a view of the opposite wall — is in fact the “real” thing? The answer, of course, is neither. Hume's paintings have effectively been immunized against successful reproduction; their resolutely specific objecthood prevents them from becoming mere images. “I like that,” Hume says. “I like creating that gap between a representation and a real thing, and the real thing truly is other.”⁹ Hume's real things, furthermore, are not only *in* but *of* real space: not only are the conditions and contents of his paintings' surroundings reflected in their glossy surfaces, but this very act of reflection is constitutive of the works themselves. Isolating these works as neatly framed images in the pages of a magazine or catalogue — as in the publication before you — is thus to present them as something fundamentally different from what they in fact are.

Hume's recent sculptures operate similarly, and their resemblance to motifs from his paintings is no accident. If he's making pictures that function as objects — as he once told Michael Craig-Martin, his paintings are “the thinnest sculptures in the world” — then perhaps he thought: Why not try to make objects that are all but images?¹⁰ Hence, Hume's newest sculptures are characterized by pictorial qualities; both rail-thin and filled with demarcated views of the space behind, his “wonky wheels,” as he calls them, are encountered as a curious form of picture. And these works are, indeed, derived from instruments of looking, having been developed (as will be discussed below) from images of gun sights. But one's experience of these sculptures as pictures will, of course, be destroyed should they be set into motion as objects — made to roll as wheels rather than staying put as sights, their axis shifted from one of focused pictorial framing to one of blurred spatial traversal. Object and image, in other words, are both united and set in opposition in these works. Sculpture, Hume's wonky wheels illustrate, is always rooted for the artist in a complicated give-and-take with picture-making itself, in an interrogation of painting's own status as a discrete form of object.¹¹

II.

Just as Hume's works take shape, obviously and adamantly, as objects, so too do they exist as subjects — as a particular form of living, even feeling, being. The artist,



Dolphin Painting I, 1990–91. Gloss paint on MDF (four panels). 86 x 232 ¼ inches; 218 x 590 cm.
Destroyed by fire, May 24, 2004

once again, nudges us toward this notion, describing his painting process as one driven by alternating emotions of aggression and love. An unsuccessful image taunts him from the studio wall and challenges him to make it right. A successful one invites him into itself, allowing him to “disappear” within it as it nears completion. Once a work is complete, he says, it “no longer needs or cares for me”; indeed, his only way to remember making a finished composition, to effectively see it again, is to re-experience it through touch.¹²

If Hume thus describes his relation to his works in unabashedly erotic terms — in which making a painting becomes a literal fusion of bodies — his account’s libidinal charge is only exceeded by that of his surfaces themselves. Can we imagine a more seductive veneer than that of these most recent images? With their lurid gloss, sculpted ridges and folds, and evident traces of Hume’s carefully affectionate, stroke-by-stroke application of paint, these works’ surfaces invite us — and indeed, the artist — to touch and even to taste. It’s no coincidence, then, that Hume traces his interest in such increasingly sculptural surfaces to a fascination with the make-up

of traditional Balinese dance. Thickly applied and designed with an eye toward garish exaggeration, such make-up transforms the dancer's face into a form of polychrome sculpture. Hume's densely wrought, downright sculpted pigment achieves this same effect — but for him the operation is less one of making faces into objects than of conceiving of objects as themselves faces. His development of these most recent works' palette in part after a nineteenth-century German atlas of skin tones (in addition to his principal color sources, Gauguin and Goya) betrays this same impulse: that of understanding painting as an engagement with the body's surface, with the colors and coloring of human skin.

It is not just Hume's interest in make-up that links his paintings to faces but also his concern with what Michael Fried, in a masterful analysis of the work of Édouard Manet, has described as *facingness*. Manet's forthright countenances and frankly rendered surfaces, Fried writes, "sought to acknowledge, not negate or neutralize, the presence of the beholder [...] in an attempt to make the painting in its entirety — the painting as a painting, that is, as a *tableau* — *face* the beholder as never before."¹³ This passage might just as well be describing Hume, who — not always but time and again throughout his oeuvre, beginning already with his late-1980s series *Doors* — situates his paintings as bluntly directed forms and faces that look out, plaintively and directly, at *us*, as if it were the paintings themselves staring us down. The most horrifying case is arguably the 2001 painting *Michael* (Jackson, not Fried), in which the now-passed superstar addresses us from a four-foot-wide tondo that his blanched and cropped face fills from edge to edge, as if singer and surface were one and the same. The most passionate incarnation of this operation is surely *Begging For It* (1994). For who does this early composition address but the artist's own viewers? Made at a transitional moment in Hume's career and stripped of any identifying detail of title or form (there is no face here other than that of the painting itself), the image's imploring figure is best understood as that of the artist's very own medium — thus rendered as begging, pleading for things left unsaid.

In its silence, Hume's 1994 image is perhaps only asking to be left alone, for *us* to stop asking *it* to do things beyond be a painting. The artist himself has discussed his work in just such terms, telling Loock, "I so desperately want [my paintings] to be autonomous, I have to be open to what they want."¹⁴ And what they want, or at least what Hume imagines they do, is to exist as themselves: to be absolved of the burden of telling stories, of representing other things, even as they remain rooted, he gladly admits, in the most specific of sources, circumstances, and channels of thought.

Nowhere in Hume's oeuvre is this desire for autonomy more forcefully declared than in his latest series of works. Barely hinting at half-told stories, reveling in their particularities of surface and form, these images are nothing if not a declaration of visual independence — of his paintings' right to exist *as such*, free of the narrative traces they carry and the historical charge immanent to these. It's no surprise, then,



Michael, 2001. Gloss paint on aluminum. Diameter 48 inches; 122 cm. Private collection

that Hume describes his work on the series as an extended face-off with pointed weapons (more on this below), or that the series' most evident figurative passage is the full-frontal address of a man's tie in *Blue Collar* (all works 2013 unless otherwise noted), positioned as if worn by the image itself. Sporting the standard uniform of ordered authority, this work stares straight out at us and tersely enjoins us to leave it, and its companions, alone. No longer pleading, the image simply states: let us live our lives as paintings, let us just *be*.

III.

If Hume's works thus address us as both subjects and objects — or better, as objects whose subjective desire is to be left alone in their objecthood — they also do so, most obviously, as pictures. Which is to say, as images of something beyond themselves. In the case of Hume's newest works, as mentioned at this essay's

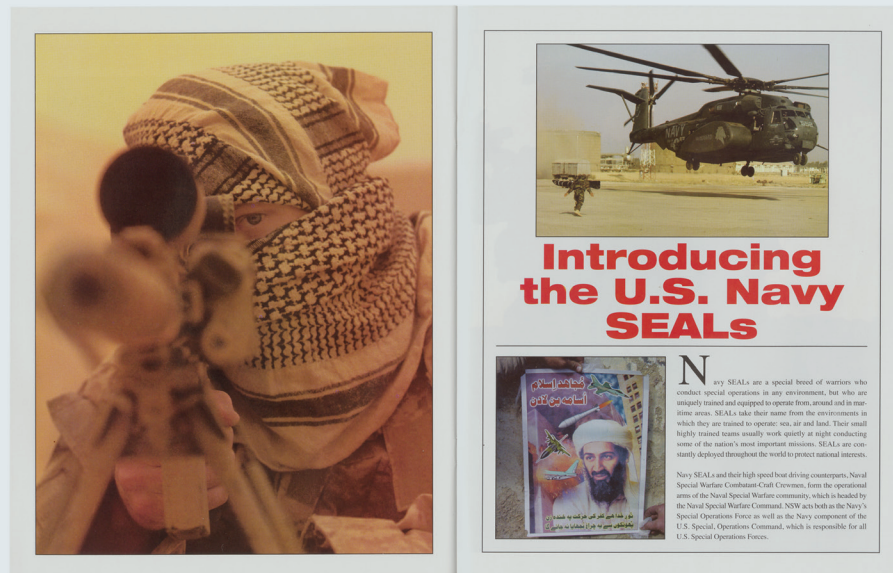


Commemorative booklet from the artist's archive

outset, the generative images at issue are particularly charged: the artist has chosen to work from photographs of some of the rawest and most intensely scrutinized events of recent history.

Why don't we go ahead and let the cat right out of the bag? Hume's primary source material for this latest series comes from a "historic commemorative issue" celebrating the assassination of Osama bin Laden. Neither newspaper nor magazine, the image-filled publication from which Hume worked is a quickly assembled one-off entitled *United We Stand!*, with the pre-9/11 World Trade Center towers on its cover and such puff-piece features as "We Got Him!" and "God Bless America" filling its pages.¹⁵ Most essentially, the booklet is a collection of pictures; these, Hume explains, are what grabbed him when he first encountered the publication at the checkout counter of an upstate New York supermarket in the summer of 2011. Standing in line with groceries in hand, he began to flip through the issue's pages and mentally isolate and distort elements from its dozens of photographs — to imaginatively excise these from the scenes of which they were a part and effectively "see" his paintings-to-be.

This initial process of image recognition and isolation, Hume recounts, occurred as a purely formal operation; with little regard for *what* the photographs of *United*



Interior spread

We Stand! showed, he seized upon specific shapes and constellations of form within them. As his own works' future appearance consumed his thinking (to paraphrase Hume's description of his practice), he simply forgot about the things and actions his source images in fact portrayed. So a fireman's helmet, propped behind its wearer in a photograph accompanying an article on the heroics of New York City's Fire Department, was singled out as a mildly angular semi-circular form. Stripped by Hume of its detailing, the helmet was then turned on its side, re-colored, and enlarged to fill nearly the entire surface of a fifty-four-by-thirty-six-inch painting. In a similar fashion, the Twin Towers and their plumes of smoke became a set of streamlined diagonal columns; Barack Obama (addressing the nation to confirm bin Laden's death) was reduced to the simplest outline of his collar and tie (in *Blue Collar*, noted above); and the menacing presence of a sharpshooter, staring straight at us behind the blurred protrusion of his gun barrel, was distilled into a cascade of crisply rendered circular forms.

For all the elegance and simplicity of these painted configurations, however, the fact remains that they are all derived from, and thus indelibly connected to, pictures of *things* — and that these things, however forgotten by Hume in his painterly

process, remain of deep and nuanced interest to the artist. When I first visited Hume's London studio to see his recent paintings last April, his discussion of their making quickly turned to a description of his fascination with the context in which he first encountered their sources. That Americans would celebrate their military's assassination of bin Laden so giddily and loudly, and that this celebration would take the form of such exaggeratedly jingoistic but oddly sterile publications as *United We Stand!*, and that this grandiose jingoism would find its natural place amid the gossip rags and cheap candy of a supermarket checkout area, all possessed an odd appeal for Hume's distinctly British sensibility. These elements' attraction, furthermore, was infectious: discussing them with me in his London studio, Hume quickly moved on to accounts of other images and encounters — such as with the bank manager near his upstate New York home, whose desktop displayed a framed photo of her husband with a posse of buddies wearing full army fatigues and holding guns aloft, seemingly ready to take on bin Laden themselves.

Much like the strange assemblage of grandiosity and trash comprising *United We Stand!*, this photo's mixture of private intimacy and public aggression struck Hume as a uniquely American construction — the sort he couldn't imagine encountering back home in the UK. Even more than this, the bank manager's photo and the supermarket commemorative booklet distilled for him a certain image of American self-understanding in the post-9/11 world: that of a brash and chest-thumping superpower, confident as ever but under evident duress, its citizens celebrating in the streets over a single distant death and internalizing the raw display of military power as a personal virtue. It is this distilled vision, finally, that lurks in Hume's most recent paintings and sculptures as a kind of submerged DNA. It is the subject, however invisible or ostensibly insignificant it may be, after and through which these works have been made.

In their oblique formal processing of such grand historical matter, Hume's newest compositions reach back to his breakthrough series of *Doors*, begun in 1988. For these earlier works — austere beautiful and very nearly abstract, much as these most recent images — are themselves permeated by the most aching, and far-reaching, of social references. Made in the context of high Thatcherism's rabid privatization of the UK's public-sector services, the *Doors*' original inspiration was a newspaper advertisement for private health insurance that, as Suzanne Cotter has noted, "showed a decrepit hospital waiting room, with a pair of doors in the background, as a symbol of the squalor of the National Health Service."¹⁶ To make his *Doors*, Hume took this and other hospital portals and painted what appeared to be near copies, using commercial gloss paint and scaling his images as if they were the real thing. The result was a series of visually spare, geometrically rigid compositions that managed to be both subtly obtuse and strikingly direct at once, both self-contained abstractions and bluntly forceful social commentary. Hume, in

discussing his choice of doors as subject matter, confirmed and expanded upon the paintings' latter role. "I realized that every door was aspiration- or class-bound in its appearance," he noted, "and the *Doors* were a kind of statement to all the so-called 'meritocratists' that we all come from the same place and we're all going to end up in the same place, [and this is] one of the last things you might see."¹⁷

The last things you might see. This is not light-hearted stuff, but the deepest and grandest of painterly themes. By an artist who emphatically states that he cares not a lick for any such thing. "I don't like making a narrative," Hume has said. "In fact, I more than don't like it, I loathe making a narrative that will give you the freedom to move into fantasy."¹⁸ But for all his statements of this sort, Hume remains a figurative painter. Or perhaps better said (for such appellations are never wholly accurate), he has avoided any embrace of pure abstraction. From the *Doors* to his most recent works, he paints things — or at least *images* of things — and thinks deeply about what these are and what they mean. The catch is that, in the process, he's unsure of how to understand the being or meaning of his works themselves. *They are pictures, but I don't know what they are.*

IV.

Hume, in his comments on the *Doors* cited above, discusses them not only as a statement on the conditions of Thatcherist "meritocracy," but as the crystallization of a specific visual experience. They are, he says, "the last things you might see" — literally, the final capstone to a life of visual experience, the image to end all images.

The primary formal trope of Hume's most recent series is also one of looking. Notice the cascade of circles and semi-circles that fill these works: the sliced and unsliced discs of *Sniper Circus*; the cropped white dots and looming blue form of *The Red Meeting the Blue*; the tripartite Mickey Mouse form of *Blue Skies*; or, most directly, the wonky wheels of his recent sculptures. All of these forms originate in images and experiences of intense looking — most frequently, in the multiple photographs of Navy SEAL sharpshooters that fill the pages of *United We Stand!*, whose paired gun barrels and sights have thus been transformed by the artist into an essential vocabulary of fragmented and repeated discs.¹⁹ In the first such photograph in the booklet — a full-page image opening the article "Introducing the U.S. Navy SEALs" — a single blurred gun barrel points directly out at the viewer, paired with an oversized targeting sight above and a solitary, deadly focused eye to its right. Nothing else is visible in the photograph but this essential act of targeting: a body, entirely covered save for its ready-to-shoot hand and single staring eye, taking aim.

When I visited Hume's studio last May to look at these recent works, he began speaking of sharpshooters right away. Before I had even the slightest idea of their role in his series, Hume was riffing on the sheer *strangeness* of what such people



Dolphin Painting V, 1991. Gloss paint on MDF (two panels).
89 x 109 inches; 226 x 277 cm. Murderme, London

do: take aim from hundreds, even thousands, of meters away, pull a trigger, and watch as a human being falls to the ground, ideally dead. In particular, Hume drew attention to the odd meeting of abstract image and concrete matter that comprises this act. Sharpshooters, by definition, are far removed from the flesh-and-blood subjects at whom they take aim and the real-life consequences of their actions; they shoot from a distant perch and then disappear. For their targets, of course, the opposite is true: for them, the sharpshooter's task is experienced as the most immediate bodily experience imaginable — one of intense pain, violence, likely death. This contrast has been heightened exponentially by the logic and apparatus of the US government's increasingly drone-based military strategy in the mountainous border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the area in which bin Laden was killed and which, accordingly, fills the pages of *United We Stand!* Nearly every week, it seems, someone in this area is killed by a “sharpshooter” sitting half a world away: a drone pilot operating from a remote facility, taking aim not at the living, breathing forms of human beings but the de-realized images of a computer screen.²⁰

At the center of both Hume's *Doors* and his most recent works, then, is a concern not just with vision but with vision and death. And, in each case, this

intertwined relationship is examined through a pictorial program of flat surfaces (swinging doors and the lenses of telescopic sights) that initiate such mortal experience by enabling the penetration of bodies into space: patients into hospital wards, bullets into air. In this operation, the three definitional modes of Hume's paintings by which I've structured this essay — object, subject, image — come together. For what else does it describe but a process of *subjects* becoming *objects* (living beings becoming brute matter in the act of dying) initiated by the spatial passage that is the structuring fantasy of every *image*, of every surface that proposes to represent something beyond itself? This set of relationships is particularly intense in Hume's newest works — which, in their frequent and varied repetition of the gun sight motif, present a near obsessive working-through of the intertwined ideas of seeing, targeting, and spatial compression. Indeed, Hume's experience of making these works was an active inhabitation of this dynamic: "I'm looking at them, and they're looking at me," he recounts of his work from such sniper shots; "I'm looking straight down their barrel [...] and I'm making paintings from looking at them."²¹

* * *

I don't mean to suggest for a second, of course, that Hume himself is thinking much at all about death, drones, or the mortality of vision. But he is certainly thinking about the mortality of *painting*. He has to. For how else can a contemporary painter sustain his practice amid constant declarations of the medium's demise but by struggling over the question of what, precisely, a *living* painting might be? "People didn't want painting," Hume recounts of his early career, "but I've always loved it."²² His task, then, has been to make images that defeat this skepticism, that seem necessary for the present moment. As Hume puts it, he works to produce "now paintings" — though he has no idea just what this phrase means or what such works might be.

At its core, painting's history in the modern era has been a series of attempts to ascertain just this: to address the question of what a "now" work *is*. And, time and again, artists have answered this query by flirting with the medium's death — or, more precisely, by attempting to keep painting alive by acting out its passing. We can think of Kazimir Malevich presenting a simple black square in 1915 and declaring that with it "I transformed myself into the zero of form and emerged from nothing to creation"; or of Joan Miró, a dozen years later, declaring that his chief desire was to "assassinate" painting; or, closer to home, Gerhard Richter turning to monochrome gray paintings in the mid-1960s as a means to achieve what he described as a "lack of differentiation, nothing, nil, the beginning and the end" of painting as a mode of practice.²³ Such examples could run for pages. Looking to them, Yve-Alain Bois has argued that the fundamental task of painting in the modern era is one of *mourning*,



Joan Miró, *Relief Construction*, 1930. Oil on wood, nails, staples, and metal on wood panel.
 35 ⁷/₈ x 27 ⁵/₈ x 6 ³/₈ inches; 91 x 70 x 16 cm. The Museum of Modern Art

of repeatedly enacting and then deferring its own death. “The whole enterprise of modernism,” Bois writes, “especially of abstract painting, which can be taken as its emblem, could not have functioned without an apocalyptic myth.”²⁴ In order to continue living, painting has had to believe in the imminence of its death.

Hume, we need stress again, is anything but apocalyptic. And his paintings — shiny, luscious, full of vivid colors and supple surfaces — are a world away from Malevich’s and Richter’s somber monochromes. My point is that, *despite all this*, Hume’s works are permeated by an immanent rhetoric of danger, violence, death — and, further, that this rhetoric is essential to his objects’ status as, in the artist’s words, “now” compositions.²⁵ Look again at all those circles in the most recent works and think of their origin as a gun sight at work (one pointed, as Hume recounts, right at him in his process of working). Are these motifs — emblems, essentially, of looking-as-killing — not metaphorical representations of painting itself? This works in both directions: the sights both point *at* Hume — thus threatening him, as does

painting itself each time he sets out to make a work — and mirror his *own* activity, that of uniting hand and eye in the project of collapsing deep space into proximate surface. If Hume almost surely isn't thinking in just these terms, there's no denying that he's made them central to his paintings and sculptures themselves — and in the process produced a suite of unabashedly self-reflexive works.²⁶ As he says of his welded wheels (themselves developed from his gun sights), he wanted to “bring in both [...] the wonky wheel of art and the wonky wheel of history.”²⁷ (Talk to Hume for just a minute and you realize he'd be hard-pressed to make works that *didn't* reflect on these both; for all his non-dogmatic statements of uncertainty, he's someone who lives and breathes the fundamental question of what it is to make a historically legitimate work of art.)

Hume's cat-and-mouse play with figuration and historical reference are part of this same operation. For if these most recent works are, as Hume himself stresses, a form of history painting — representations of a series of “pregnant moments” connected to one of the great historical dramas of our time — Hume short-circuits this notion by rendering their historical scenes all but invisible and declaring his disinterest in any narrative whatsoever. But simultaneously, as we've seen, he suggests just the opposite: that history and narrative *are*, in fact, essential to both his process of making these works and his thinking about them.²⁸ The point, it seems, is that he leaves these opposing positions unresolved. In this, Hume establishes his works' very stance of irresolution — and indeed, the unresolved historical status of painting itself — as the essential substance of his art.

Painting isn't dead or dying for Hume, then — it's just stumbling along unsure of itself. As he describes it, his works are a series of “flawed individuals,” always falling one step short: “The great disappointment of making anything is that it's not everything,” he says, “and you'd like to make it everything.”²⁹ The result is a process grounded in sadness and regret; as he further notes, “If I can't see regret in a painting, then I think that it's less than truthful.”³⁰ So where do we see regret in Hume's own work? Everywhere, I think — in his vibrant colors, laconic forms, elaborately constructed surfaces, and careful strokes. All of these, unabashedly beautiful as they are, are simultaneously testament to the necessary failure of which Hume speaks: of his paintings' inability to exist as autonomous, complete beings, free from the material particularities of the environments they reflect or the historical contingencies of the world after whose image they are conceived. The drama of this failure is the engine of his practice: of painting (and sculpture-making, which in Hume's case is always inextricably linked to his primary medium) as a process of working toward “everything” — only to end up with the imperfect pieces and mismatched parts of which, inevitably, this everything is made.

NOTES

1. Hume as cited in "Ulrich Loock — Gary Hume: A Conversation," in *Gary Hume* (London: Other Criteria, 2009), p. 9.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
3. These and other unattributed comments by Hume were made during two visits by the author to the artist's London studio in April and May 2013.
4. Hume as cited in *Gary Hume: Karneval/Carnival* (Hannover: Kestnergesellschaft, 2004), p. 16.
5. For Judd's discussion of "specific objects," see his seminal 1964 essay "Specific Objects," reprinted in *Donald Judd: The Complete Writings 1959–1975* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2005), pp. 181–9. Hume has noted that Judd was particularly influential for him during his formative years at Goldsmiths College in the 1980s — as a figure indelibly connected to conceptualism who Hume nevertheless saw as "more of a spiritual artist" (Loock, p. 5). Hume's continued interest in Judd is evinced by his continued and intensifying interest in making objects that straddle the boundaries of painting and sculpture; indeed, Hume's question of "What are these things?" is exactly what Judd's 1964 essay addresses.
6. See dulux.trade-decorating.co.uk. Accessed July 10, 2013.
7. Max Kozloff, "Jasper Johns," *The Nation* (March 16, 1964), as cited in Jeffrey Weiss, "Painting Bitten by a Man," in *Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting, 1955–1965* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 5. Emphasis from the original.
8. Hume as cited in *Gary Hume: Karneval/Carnival*, p. 69.
9. Hume as cited in Loock, p. 11.
10. Hume described his paintings as a form of sculpture during a panel discussion at the opening of his 2004 exhibition "The Bird Has a Yellow Beak" at the Kunsthau Bregenz. See *Gary Hume: Karneval/Carnival*, p. 1.
11. When I visited Hume's studio in May, he had recently become fascinated with the idea of integrating multiple wheels into sculptural ensembles, with rolled-up painted sheets inserted into easel-like forms on plinths behind them. "Rolled maps," Hume told me, was how he referred to these potential works, which my American ear initially misunderstood as "world maps." But what is a rolled-up map, after all, but the world's three-dimensional substance represented as two-dimensional image and then transformed again, in the act of rolling, into a three-dimensional (precisely *sculptural*) form? Hume's thinking around these works, in other words, has consistently focused on the intertwined relationship of sculpture and painting, object and image.
12. Hume commented on his practice as a process of taunting and disappearance in conversation with the author, May 2013. His comments on his paintings' needs and cares and his ability to reconnect with his completed images only through touch can be found in Loock, p. 11.
13. Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 266. Emphases from the original.
14. Loock, p. 10.
15. The booklet was published in 2011 by Multi-Media International, based in Tinton Falls, New Jersey.
16. Suzanne Cotter, "The Black Swan," in *Gary Hume: Door Paintings* (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2008), p. 15.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
18. Loock, p. 10.
19. The discs of *Blue Skies*, Hume has advised, are derived not from a gun sight but the other way around: the artist developed them from his recollections of looking at the bright Southwestern sky through a series of bullet holes in the side of an outhouse he encountered while traveling near the Grand Canyon. For his remarks, see the July 2013 video interview made to accompany this book.
20. See, for instance, Elisabeth Bumiller, "A Day Job Waiting for a Kill Shot a World Away," *New York Times*, July 29, 2012. In a July 2013 studio visit, Hume described his particular fascination with the now-iconic image of Obama and his cabinet watching the live feed of bin Laden's assassination from

the White House "war room" — and thus appearing, he comments, as if watching a video game in progress before them.

21. Hume makes these comments while discussing *Sniper Circus* in the July 2013 video interview.

22. Loock, p. 8.

23. All of these examples are taken from my essay "Modern Painting, Modern Iconoclasm," in *Target Practice: Critiques of Painting, 1949–1978*, ed. Michael Darling (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 2009), pp. 126–43.

24. Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning" (1986), reprinted in Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), p. 230.

25. This claim concerns not just the specific paintings under discussion, but *all* of Hume's works. Think, for instance, of *Michael* or *Begging For It*, or listen to the artist discussing his 2009 works *The Shit* and *The Cunt*: "Making art is mainly about permission, what permission you give yourself to make something. So these paintings, the permission for them was imagining the last moments just as a soldier's eyes glaze over in death." See "Gary Hume in Conversation with Caroline Douglas," in *Gary Hume: Flashback* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2012), p. 23.

26. Indeed, we can see another connection to Johns's practice — which itself began as a response to an apparent crisis of painting as a medium — in Hume's insistent rhetoric of targeting.

27. Hume makes this comment in the July 2013 video interview.

28. Discussing his recent works with Caroline Douglas in 2012, for example, Hume stressed both their "Americanness" and explicit status as history paintings: "I've just made this series of paintings in America, and I was painting them as history paintings. I'm doing the killing of Osama bin Laden, I'm doing that moment, that one second, in American history." See Douglas, p. 28. Hume's inclusion of flowers in the present exhibition, he notes in the July 2013 video interview, is intended to counter just this historical focus: "because nature will always return" after history's wonky wheel has rolled over it.

29. Loock, p. 10.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

THE WONKY WHEEL

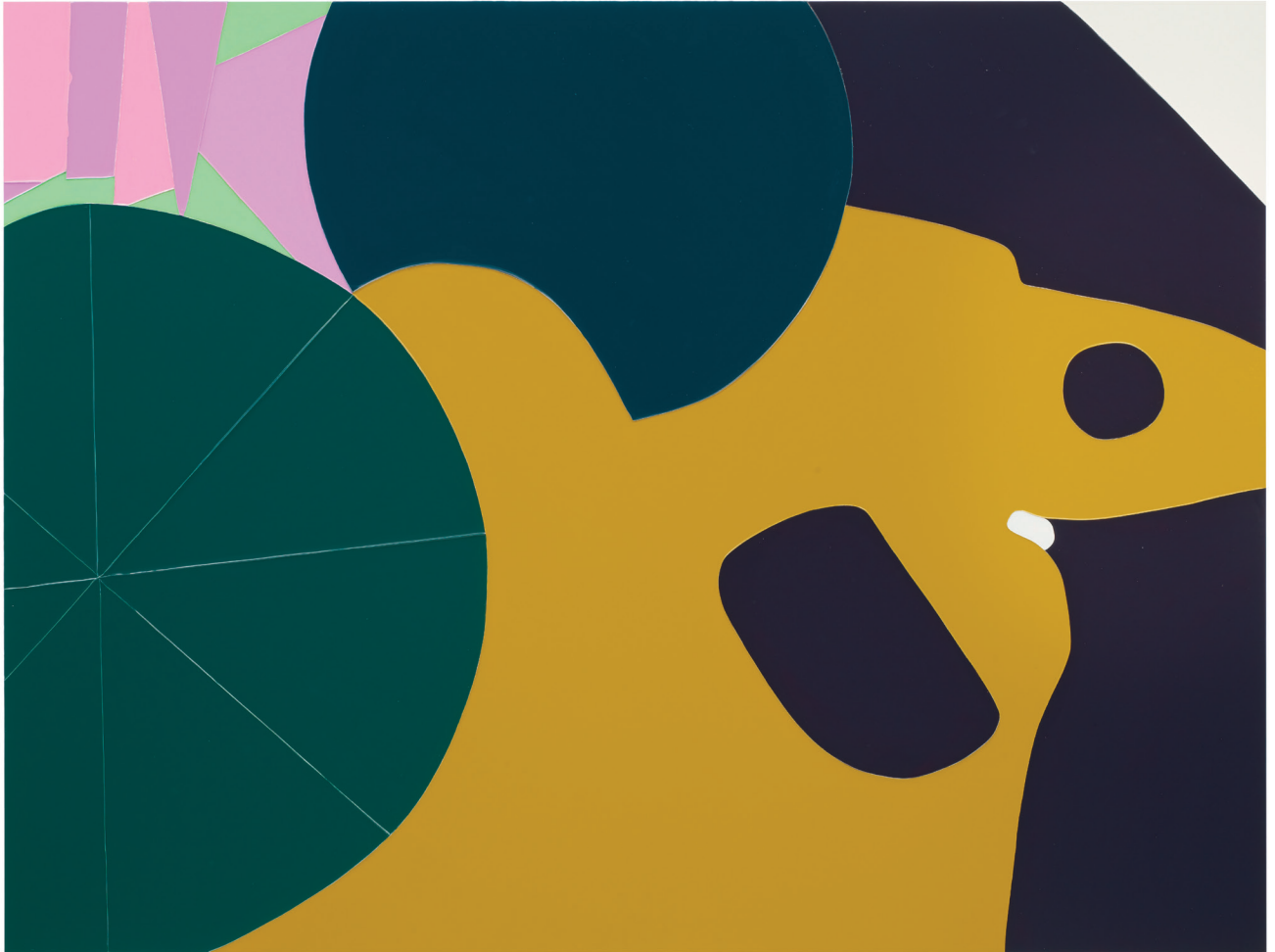
Leaving the Earth, 2013
Enamel on aluminum
54 x 36 inches; 137 x 92 cm







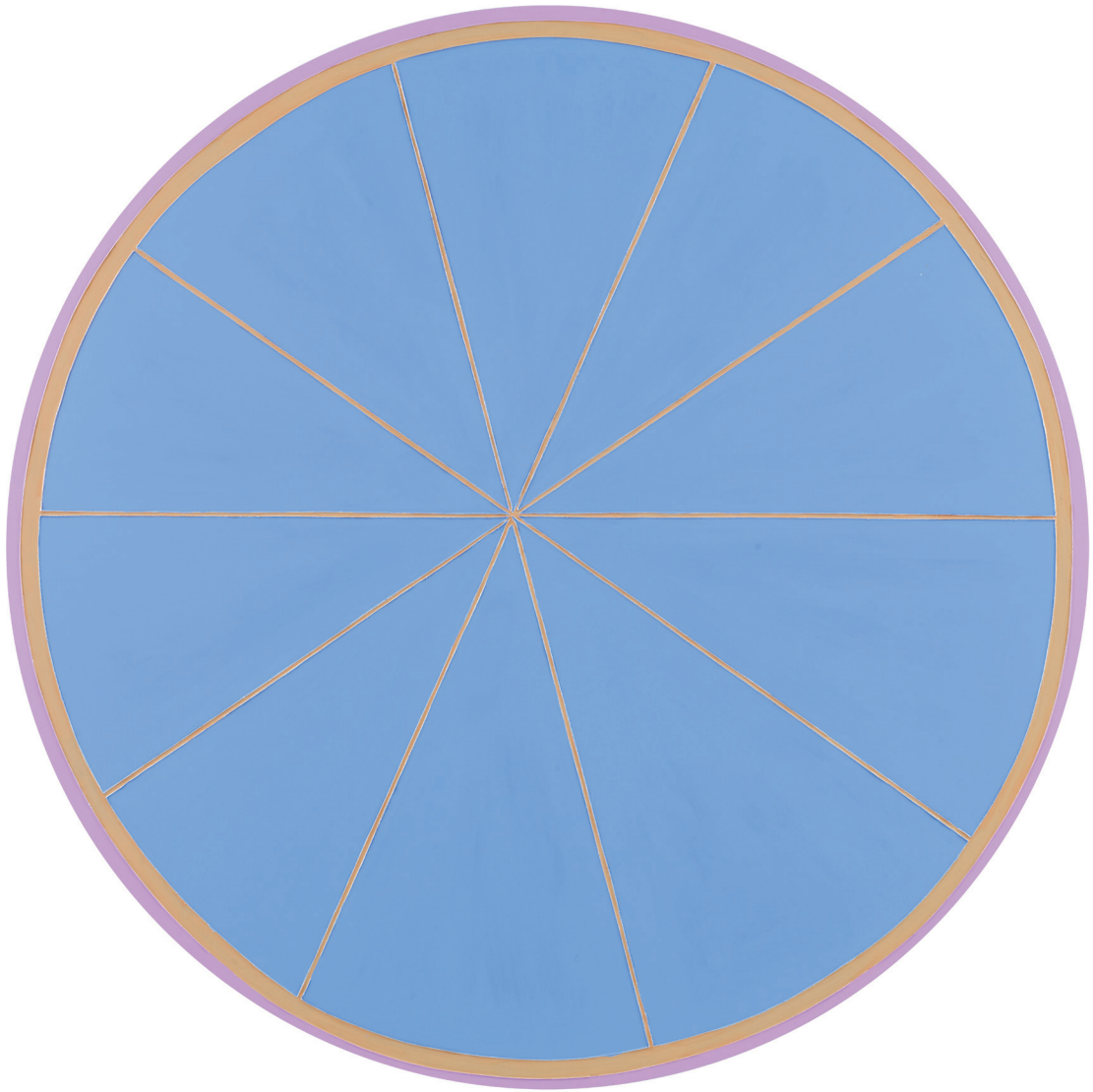
Sniper Circus, 2013
Enamel on aluminum
54 x 71 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches; 137 x 182 cm







Sight, 2013
Enamel on aluminum
Diameter: 58¼ inches; 148 cm

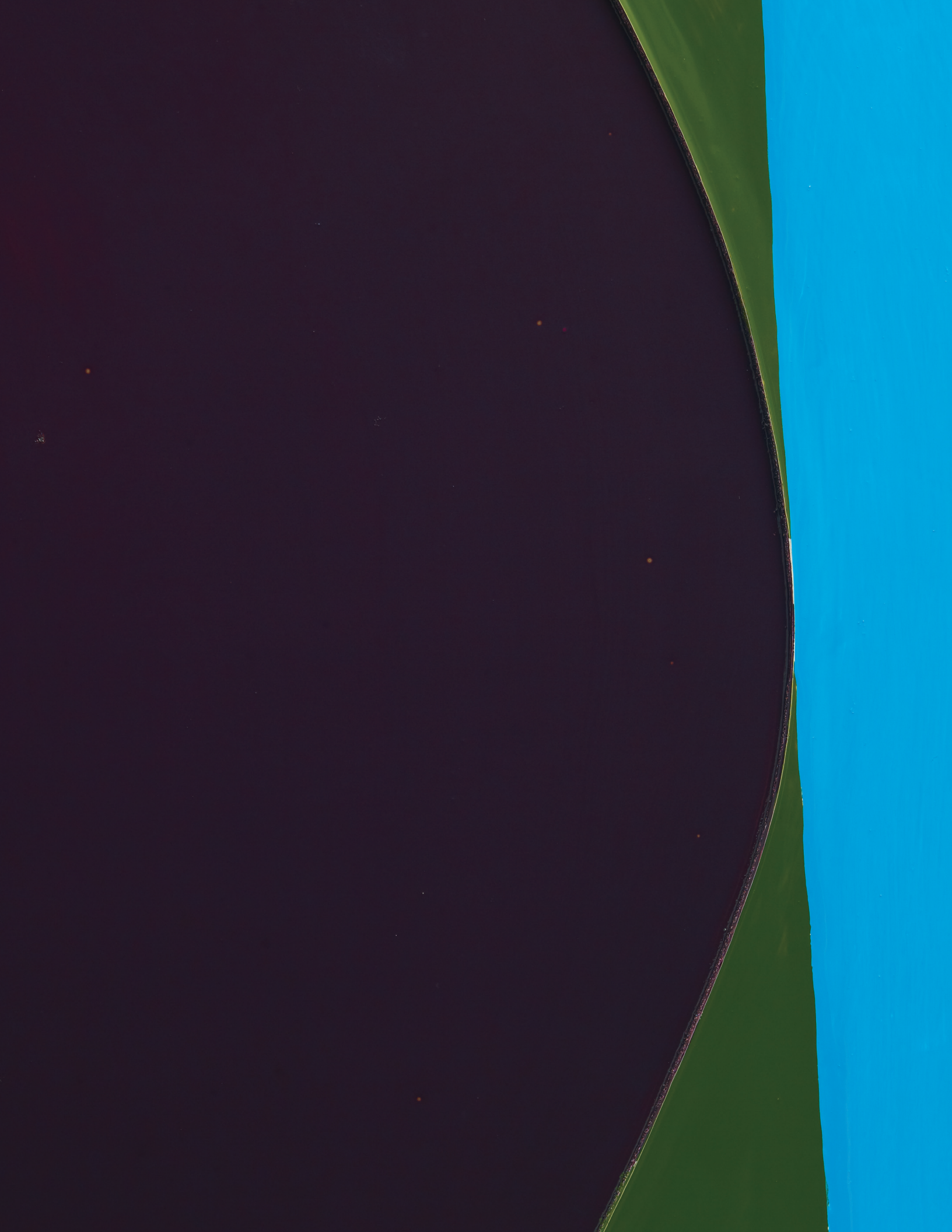




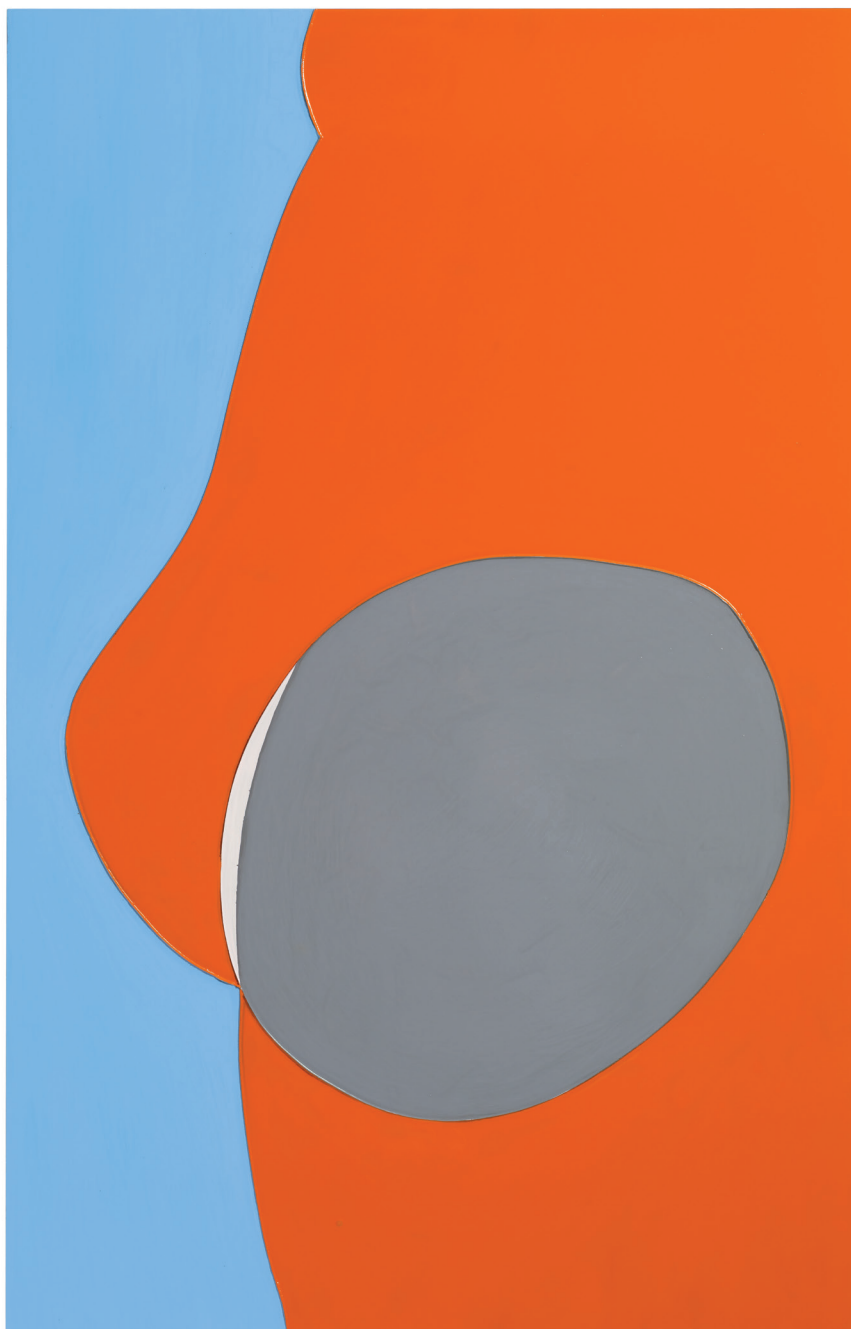


The Blue Wedge, 2013
Enamel on aluminum
54 x 36 inches; 137 x 92 cm

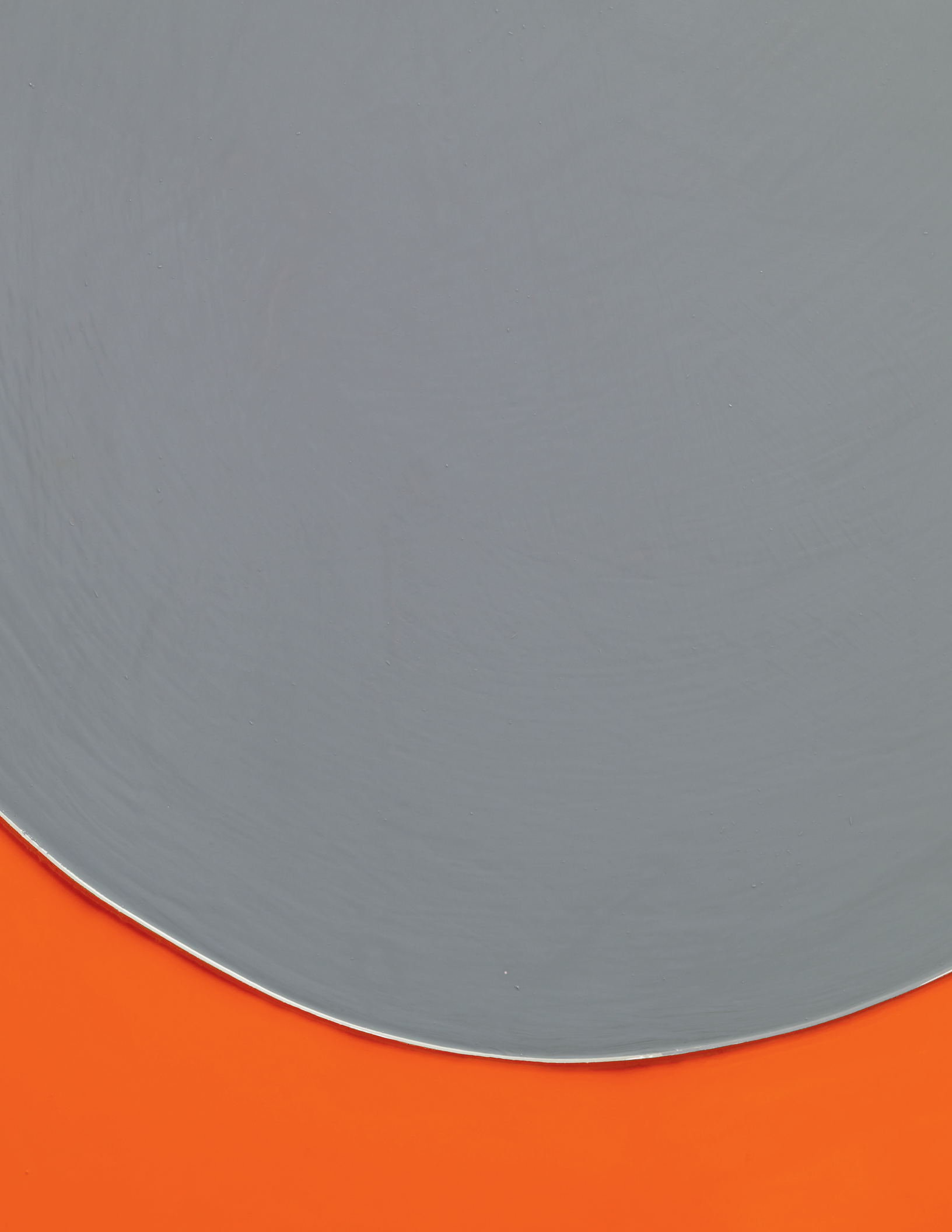




First Light, 2013
Enamel on aluminum
42 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 27 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches; 109 x 70 cm







Night Watch, 2013
Enamel on aluminum
45¼ x 36 inches; 115 x 92 cm







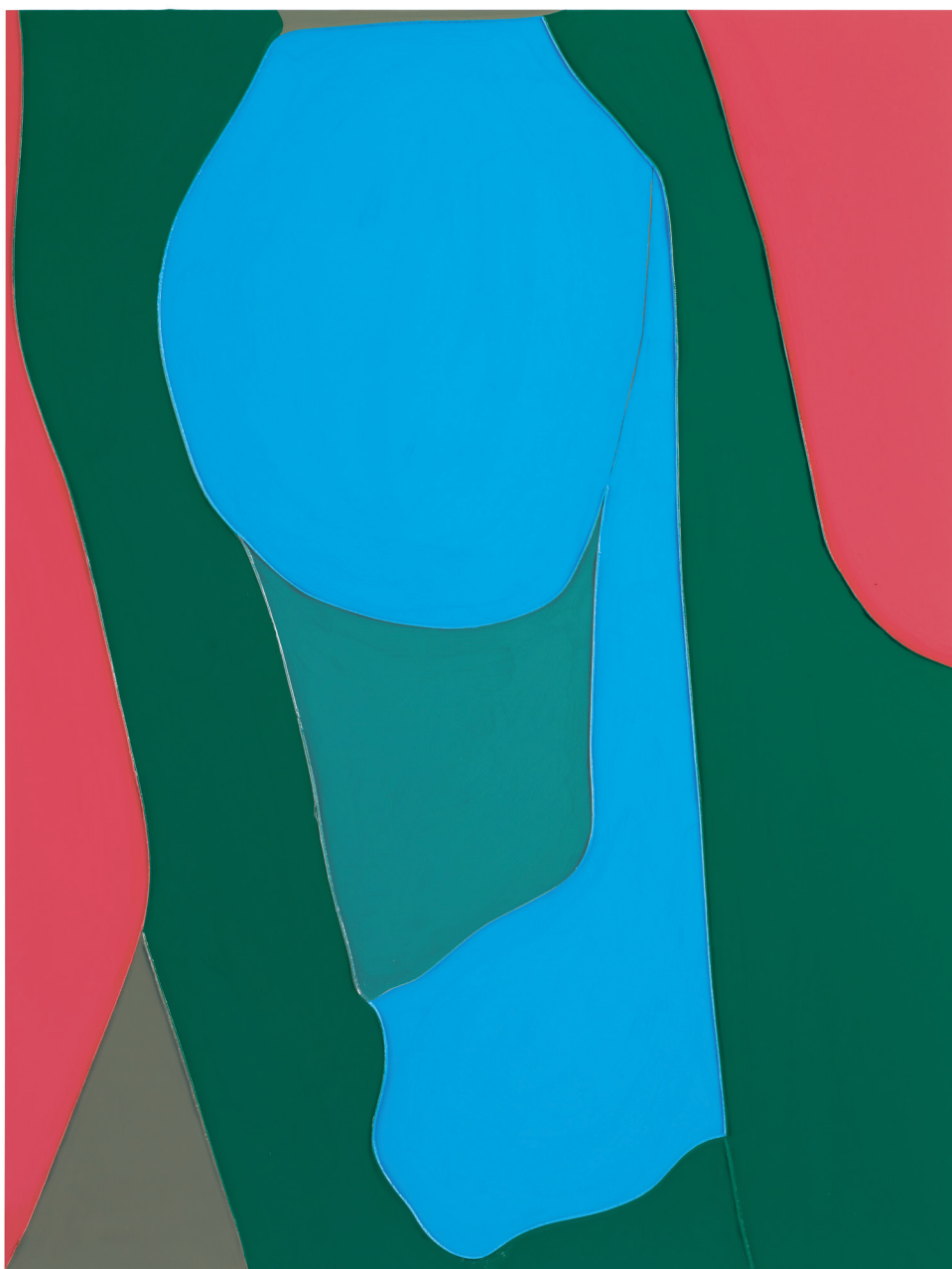
The Wonky Wheel (Red), 2013
Enamel on aluminum
50 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 50 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches;
128 x 128 x 6 cm







Searchlight, 2013
Enamel on aluminum
48 x 36¼ inches; 122 x 92 cm



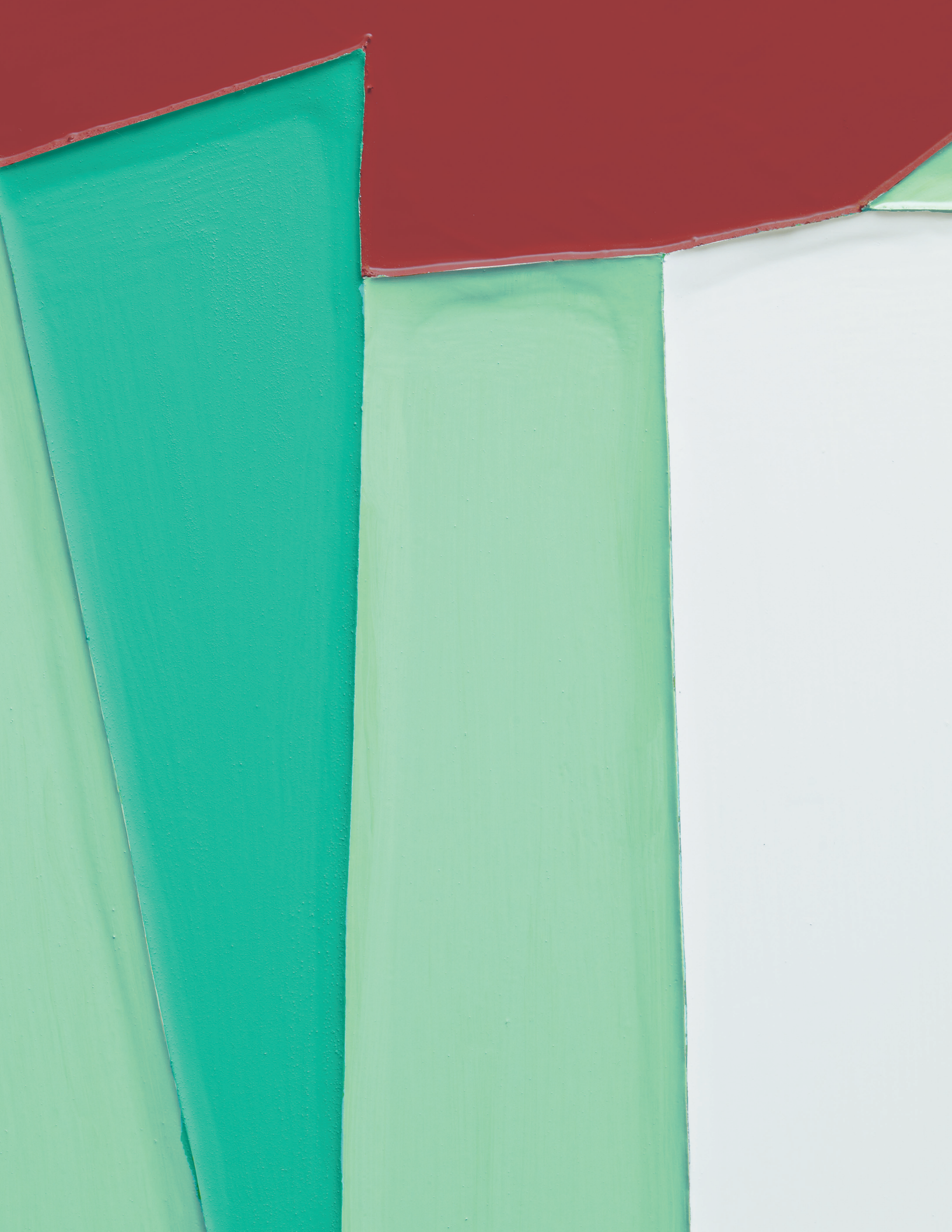




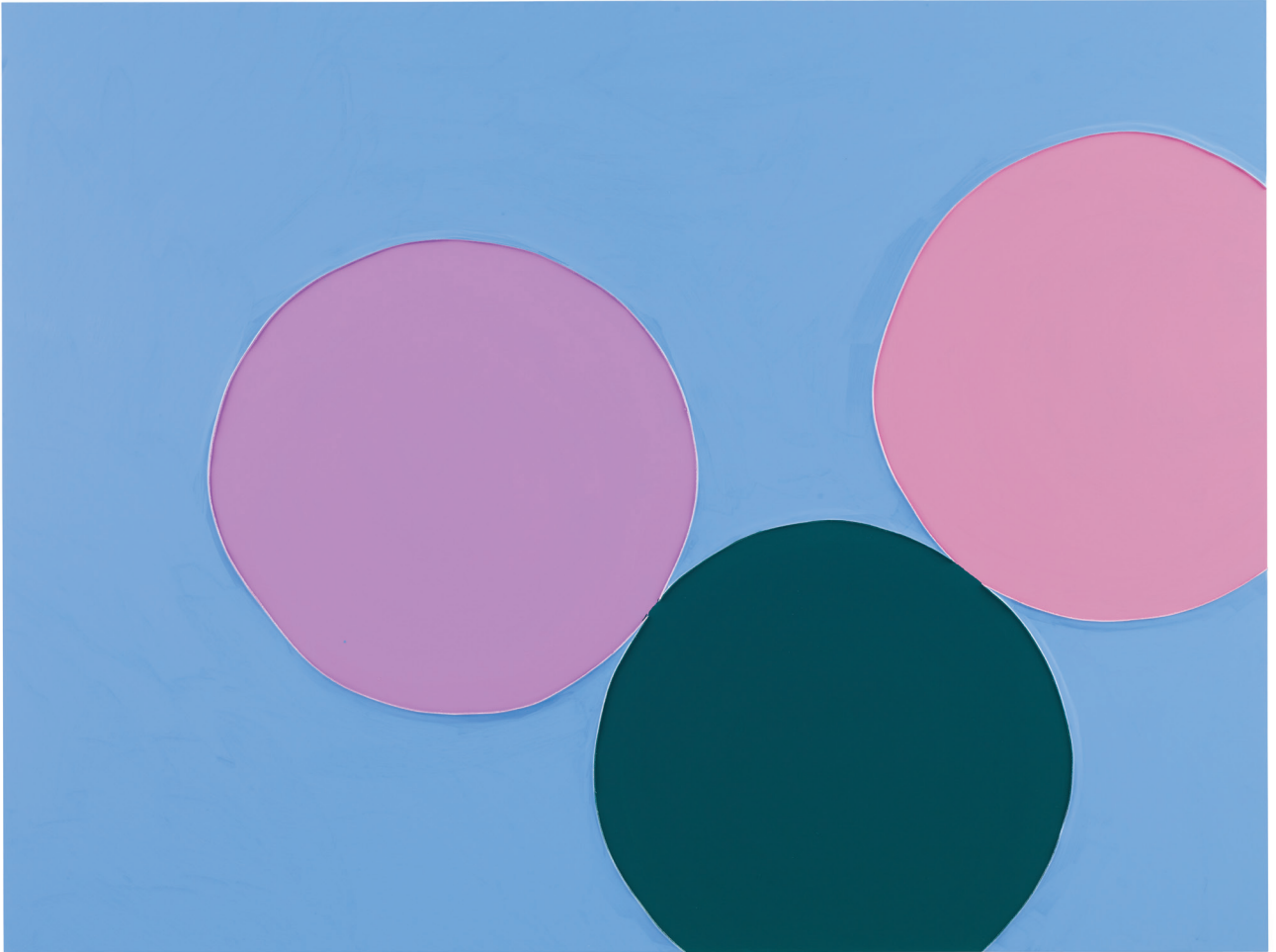
The Red Meeting the Blue, 2013
Enamel on aluminum
54 x 71 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches; 137 x 182 cm

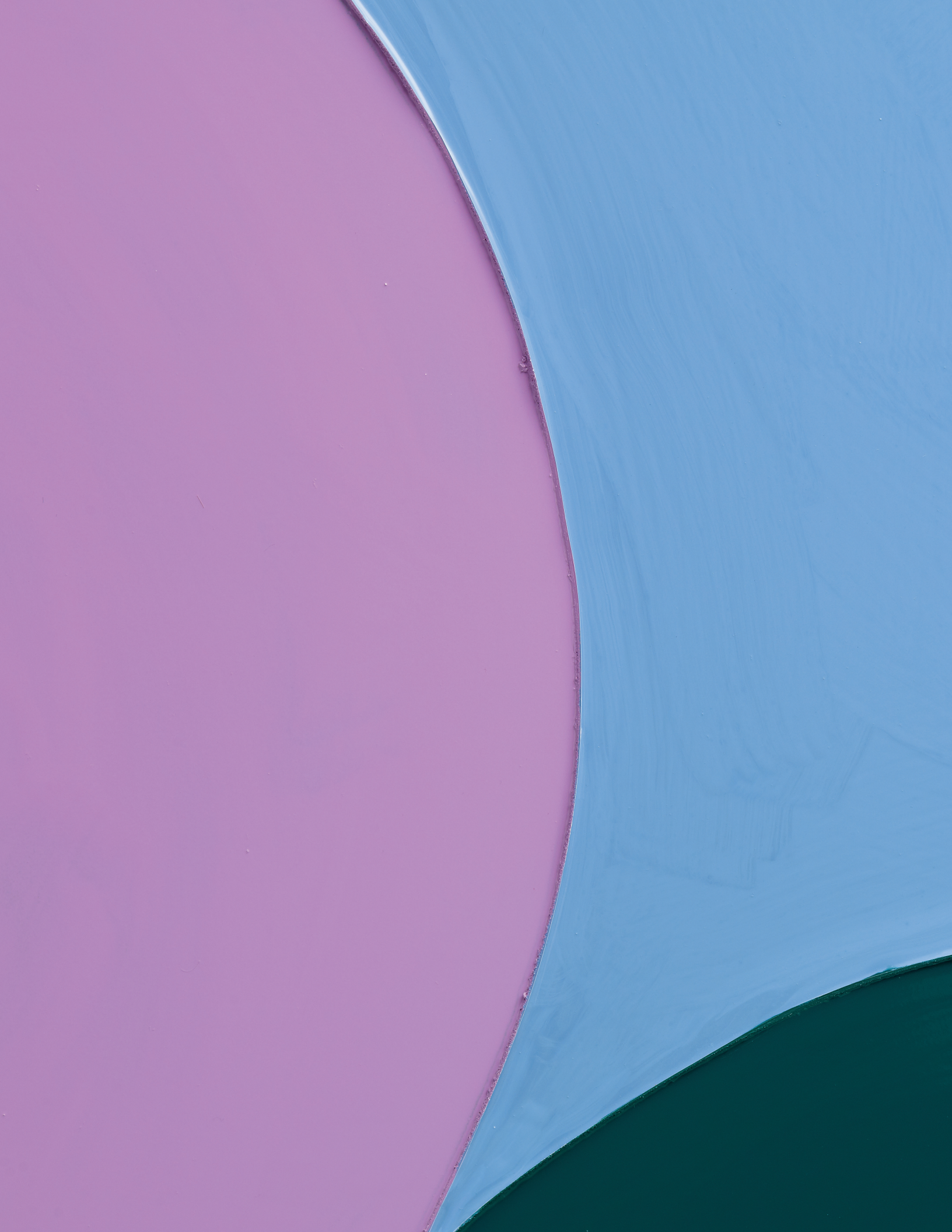


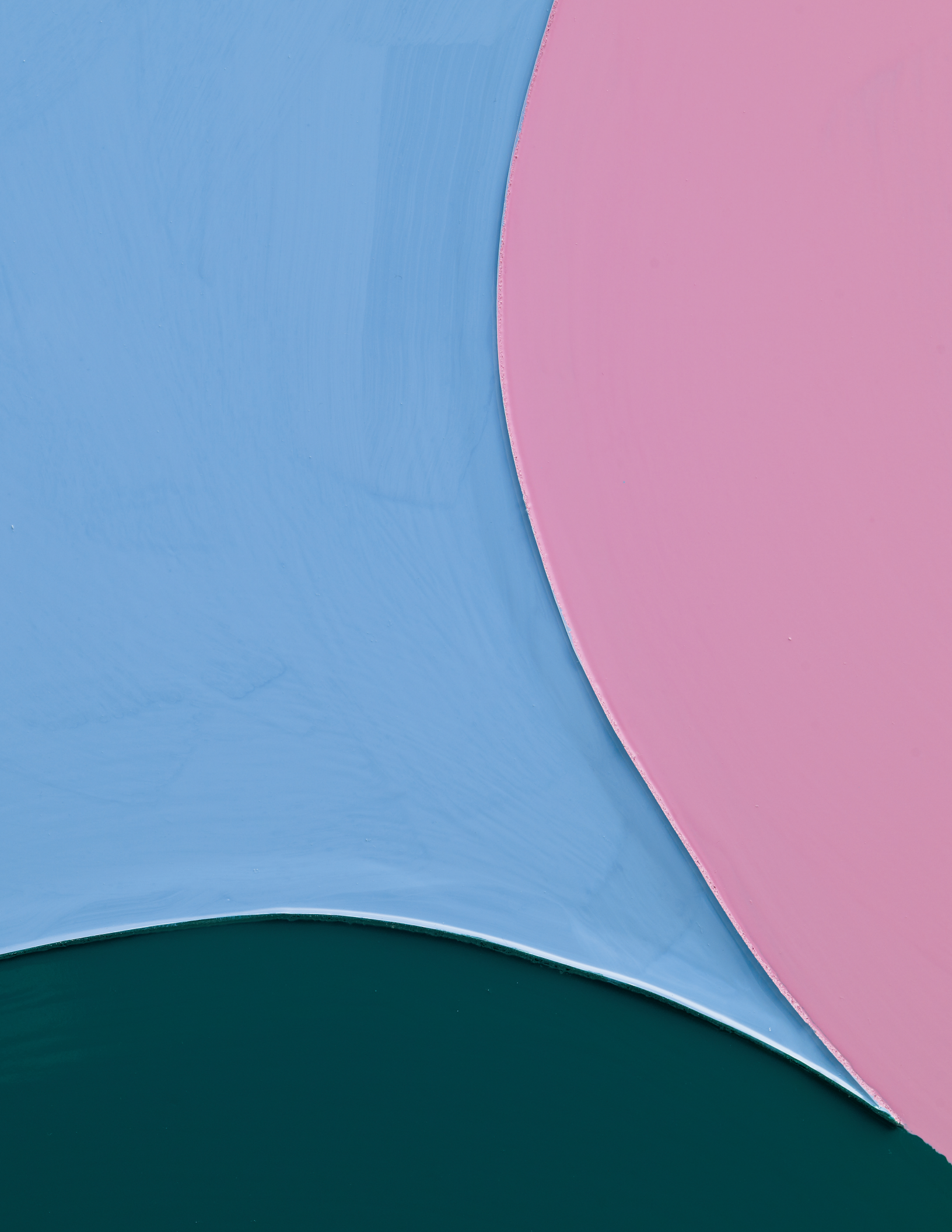




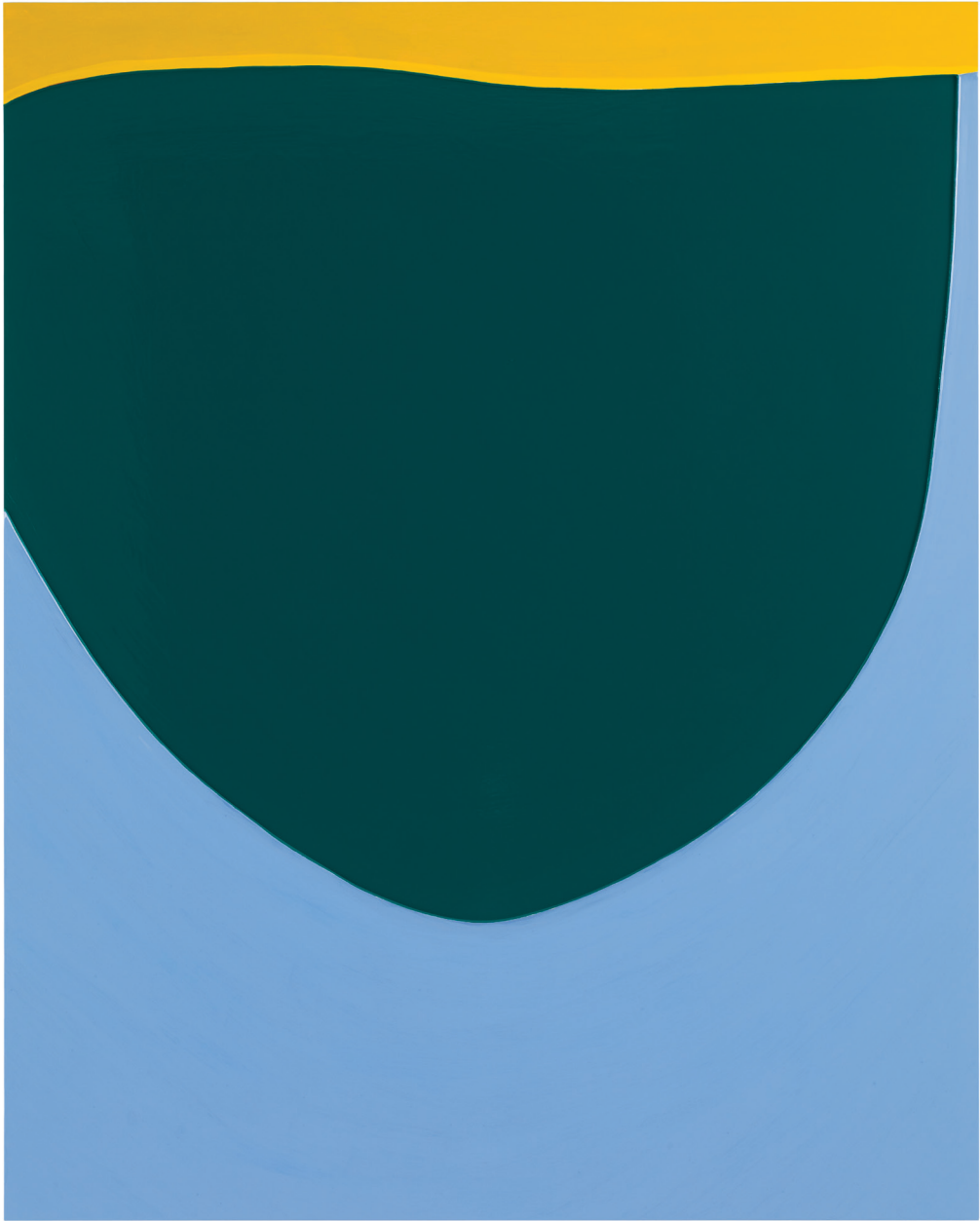
Blue Skies, 2013
Enamel on aluminum
44 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 60 inches; 114 x 153 cm







Maw, 2013
Enamel on aluminum
45 1/8 x 36 inches; 115 x 92 cm



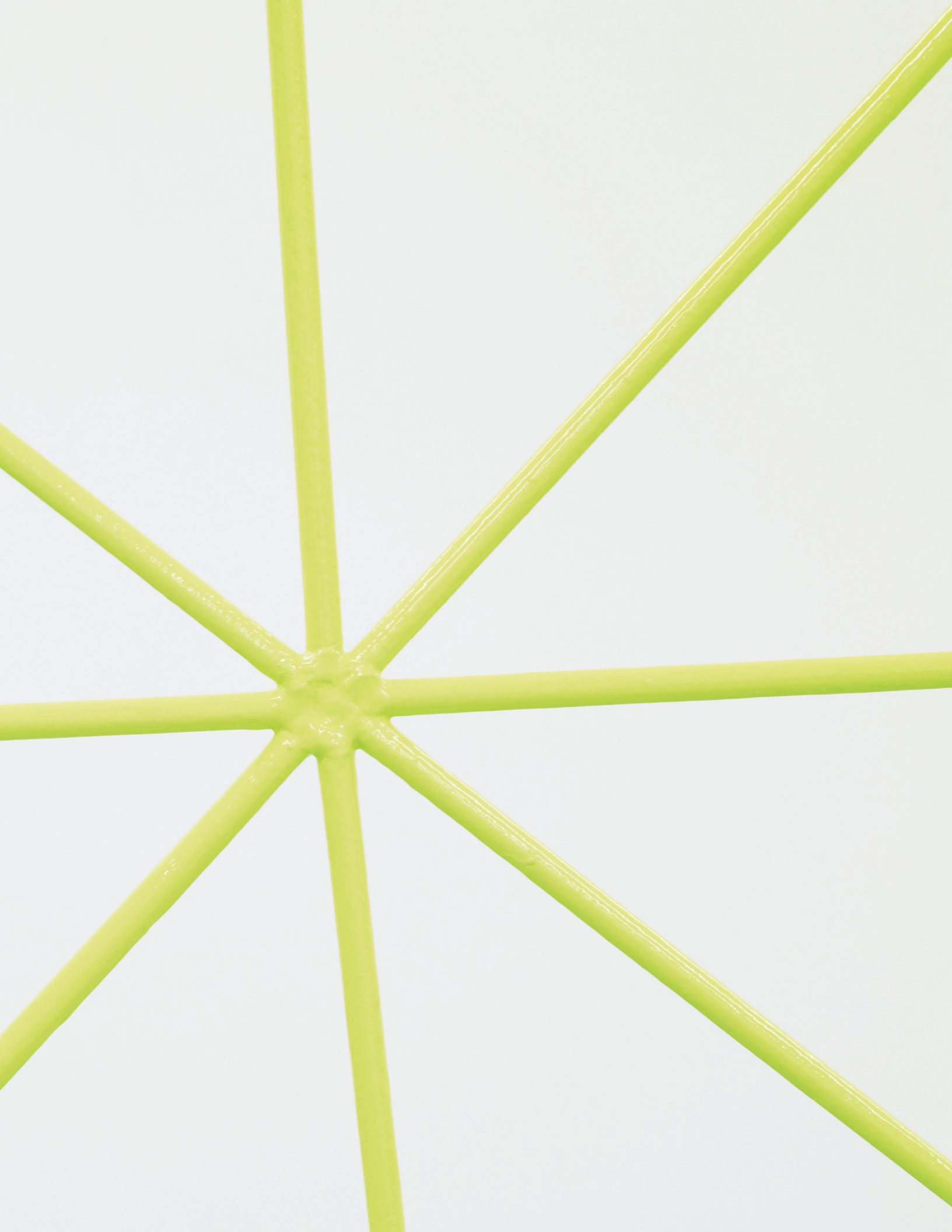




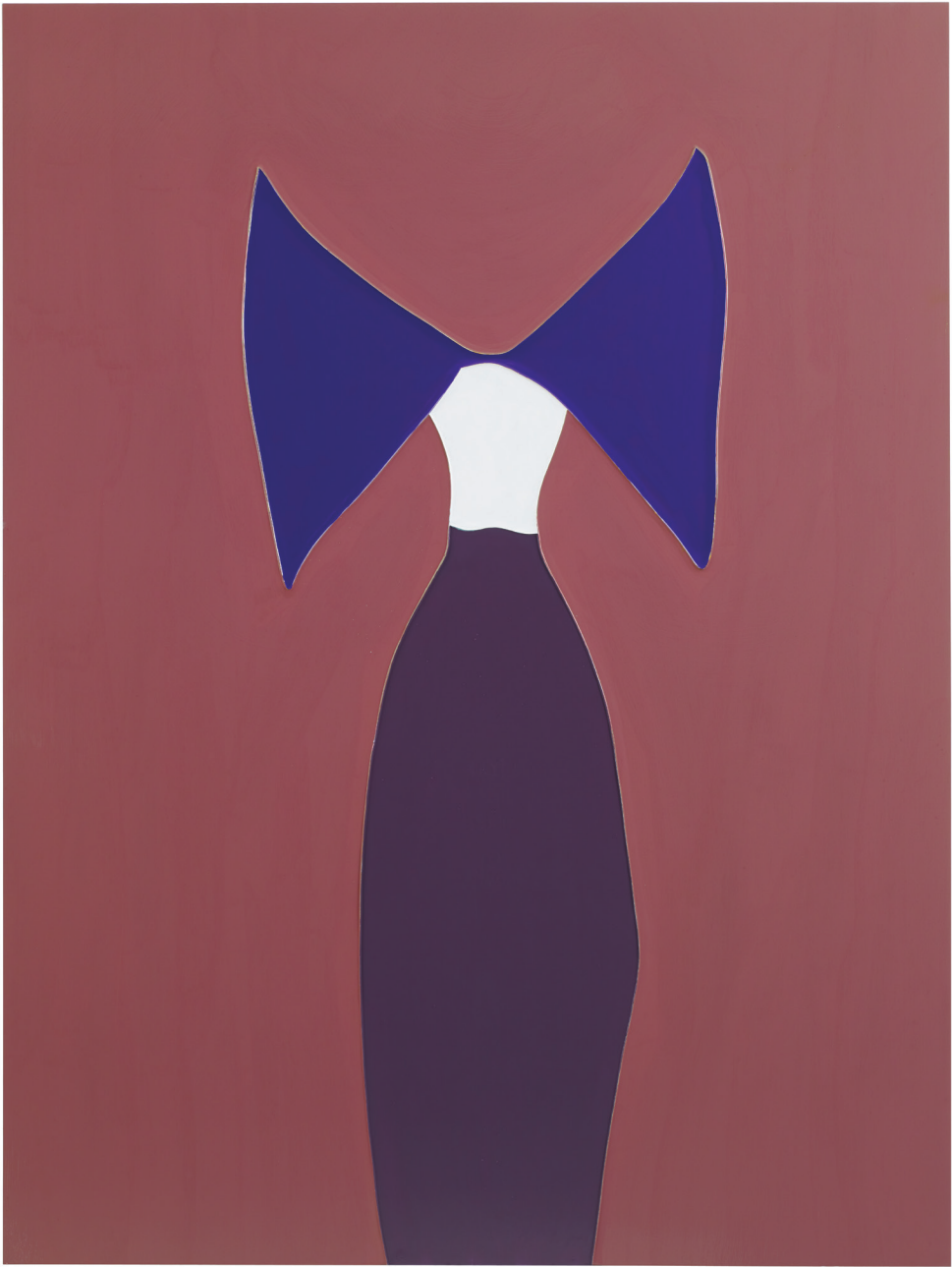
The Wonky Wheel (Yellow), 2013
Enamel on aluminum
83 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 83 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches;
213 x 213 x 6 cm



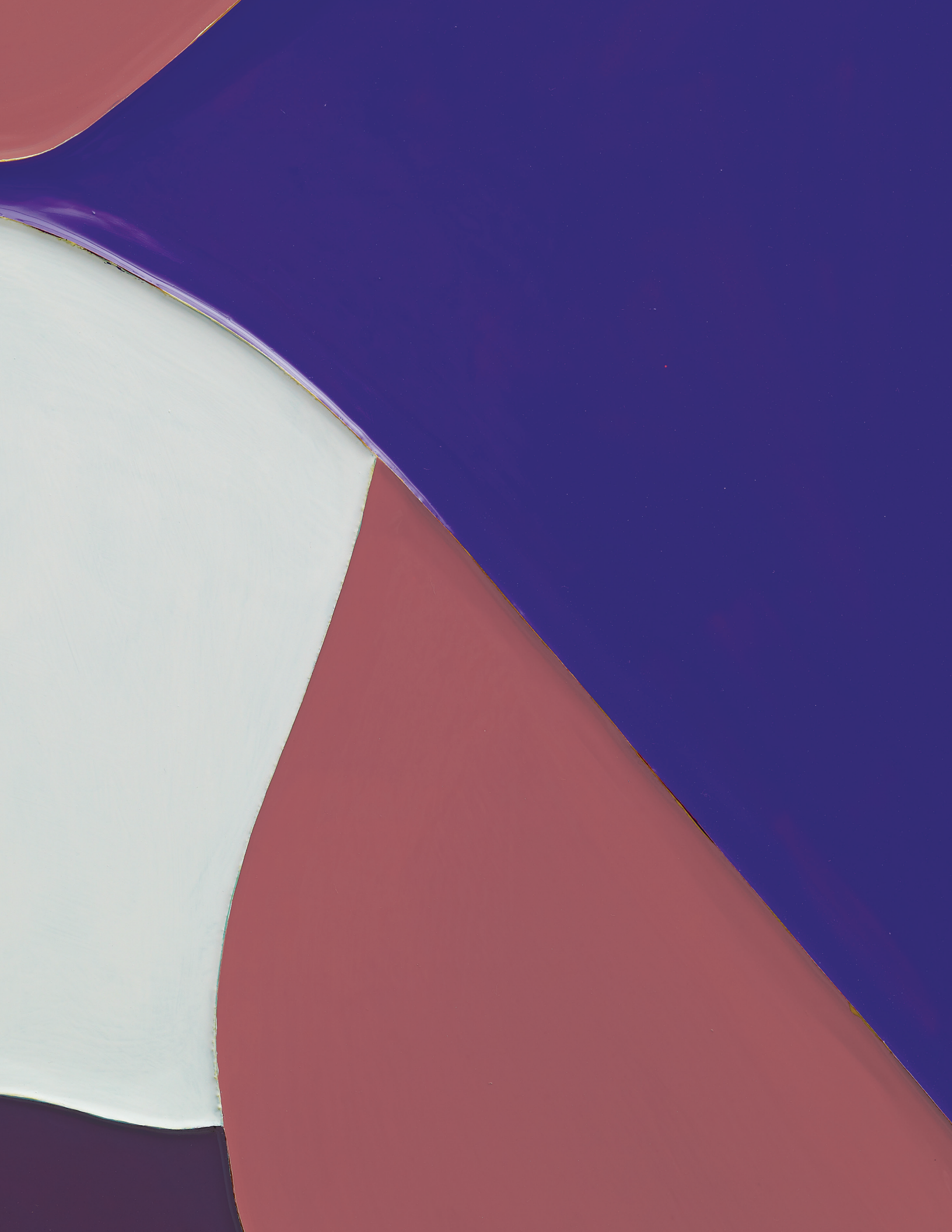




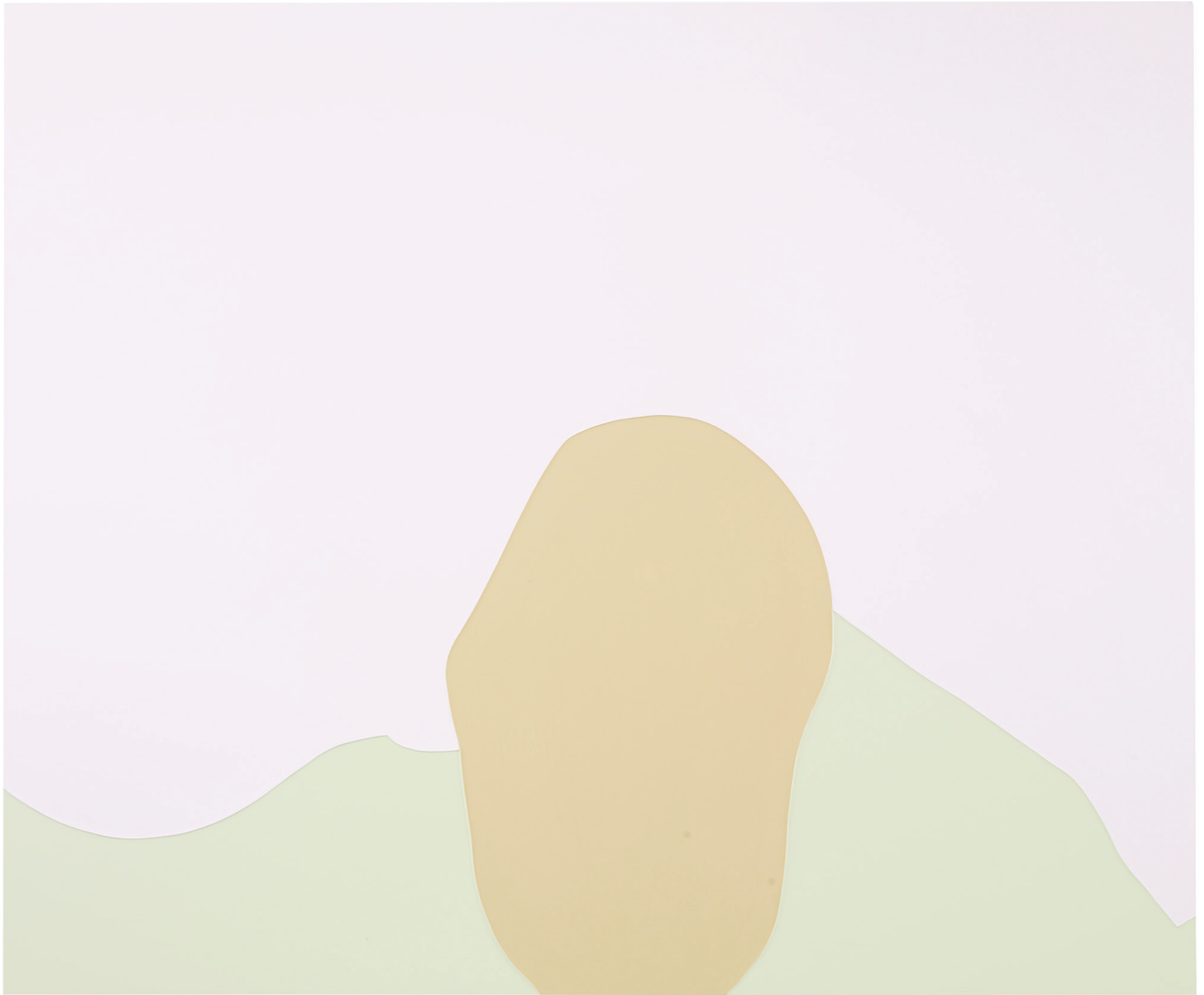
Blue Collar, 2013
Enamel on aluminum
59 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 45 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches; 152 x 115 cm







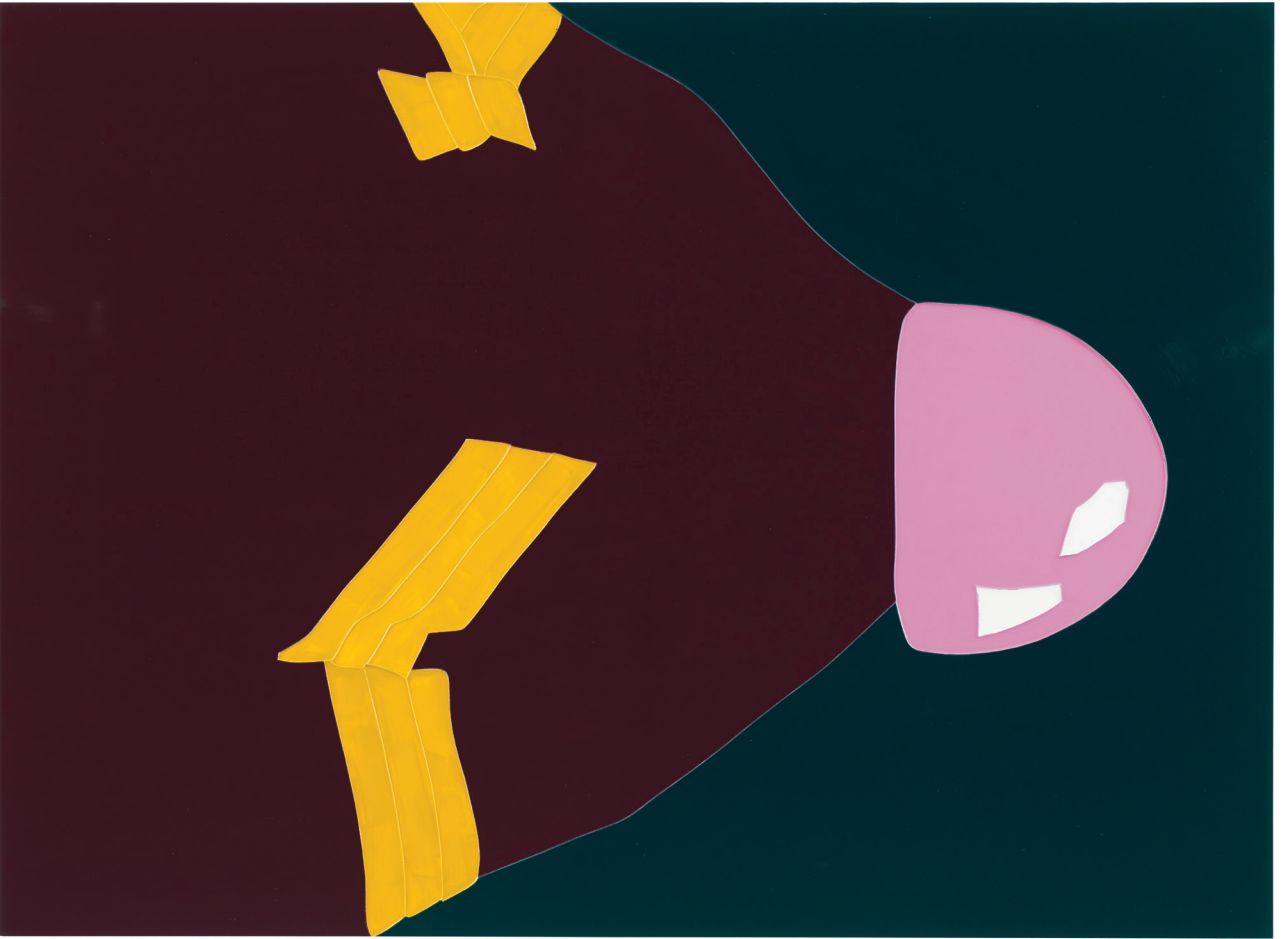
The Mound, 2013
Enamel on aluminum
60 x 72 inches; 153 x 183 cm







The Blind Major, 2013
Enamel on aluminum
44 1/8 x 60 inches; 112 x 153 cm



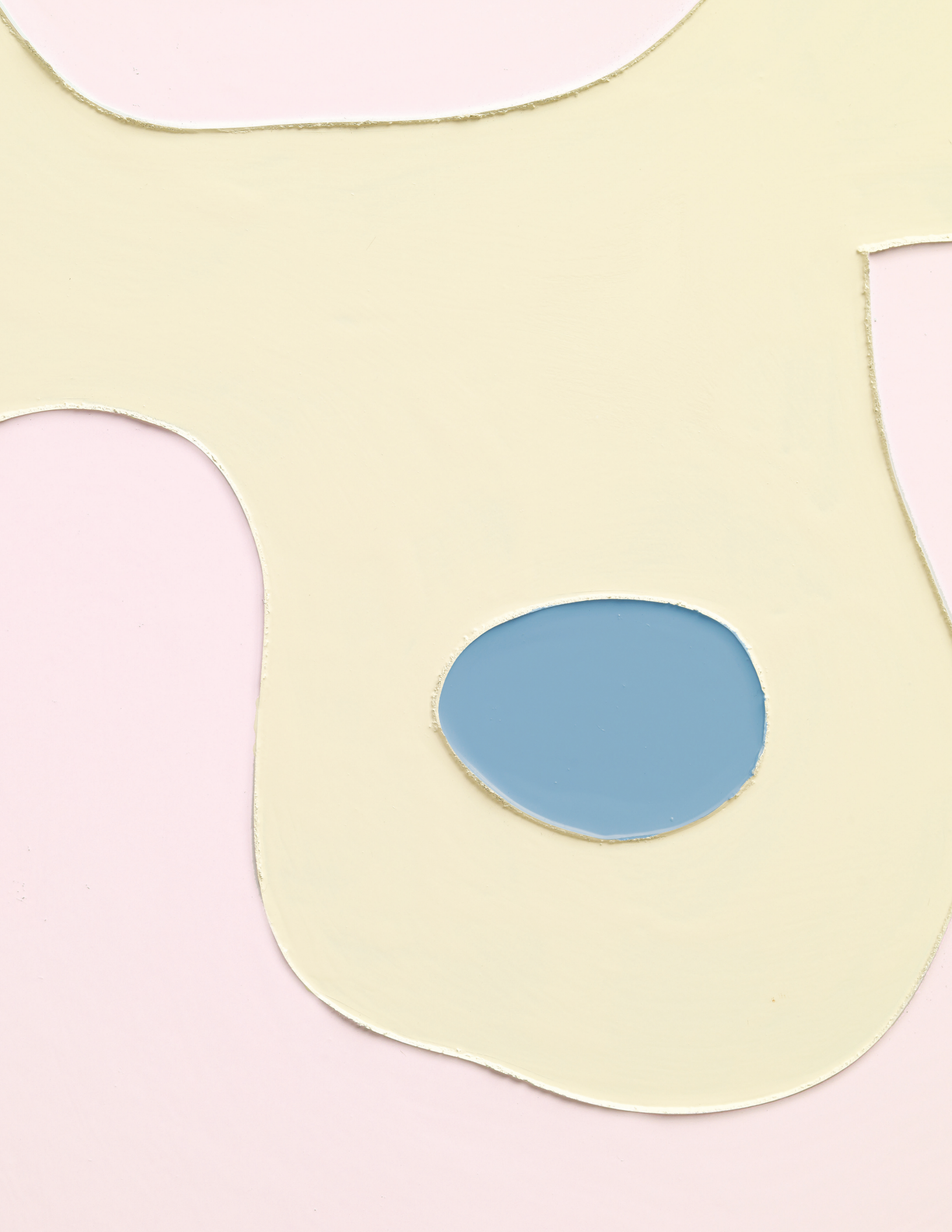




Bones, 2013
Enamel on aluminum
60¼ x 45⅞ inches; 153 x 115 cm

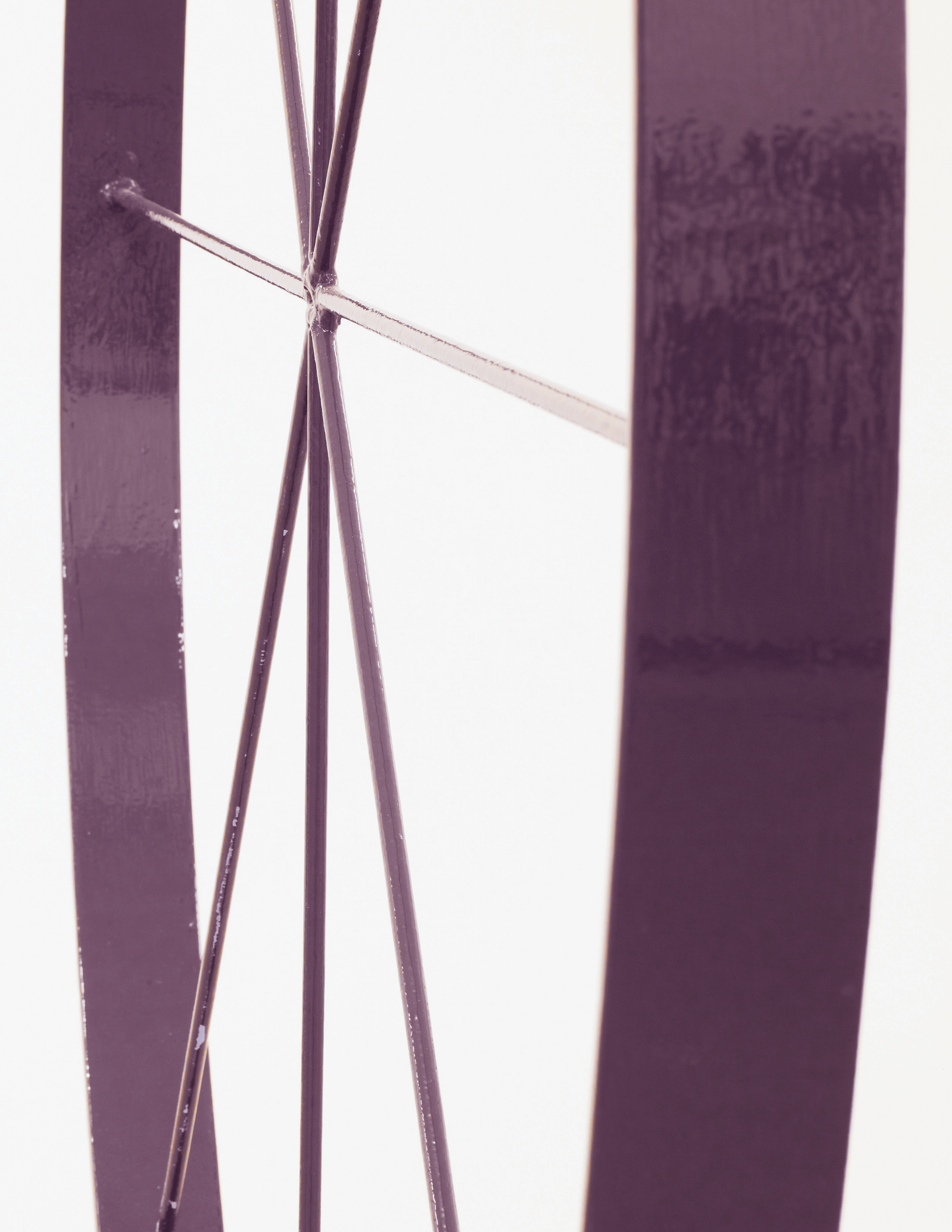






The Wonky Wheel (Blue), 2013
Enamel on aluminum
50 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 50 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches;
128 x 128 x 6 cm





Fatigues, 2013
Enamel on aluminum
60 x 45 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches; 153 x 115 cm





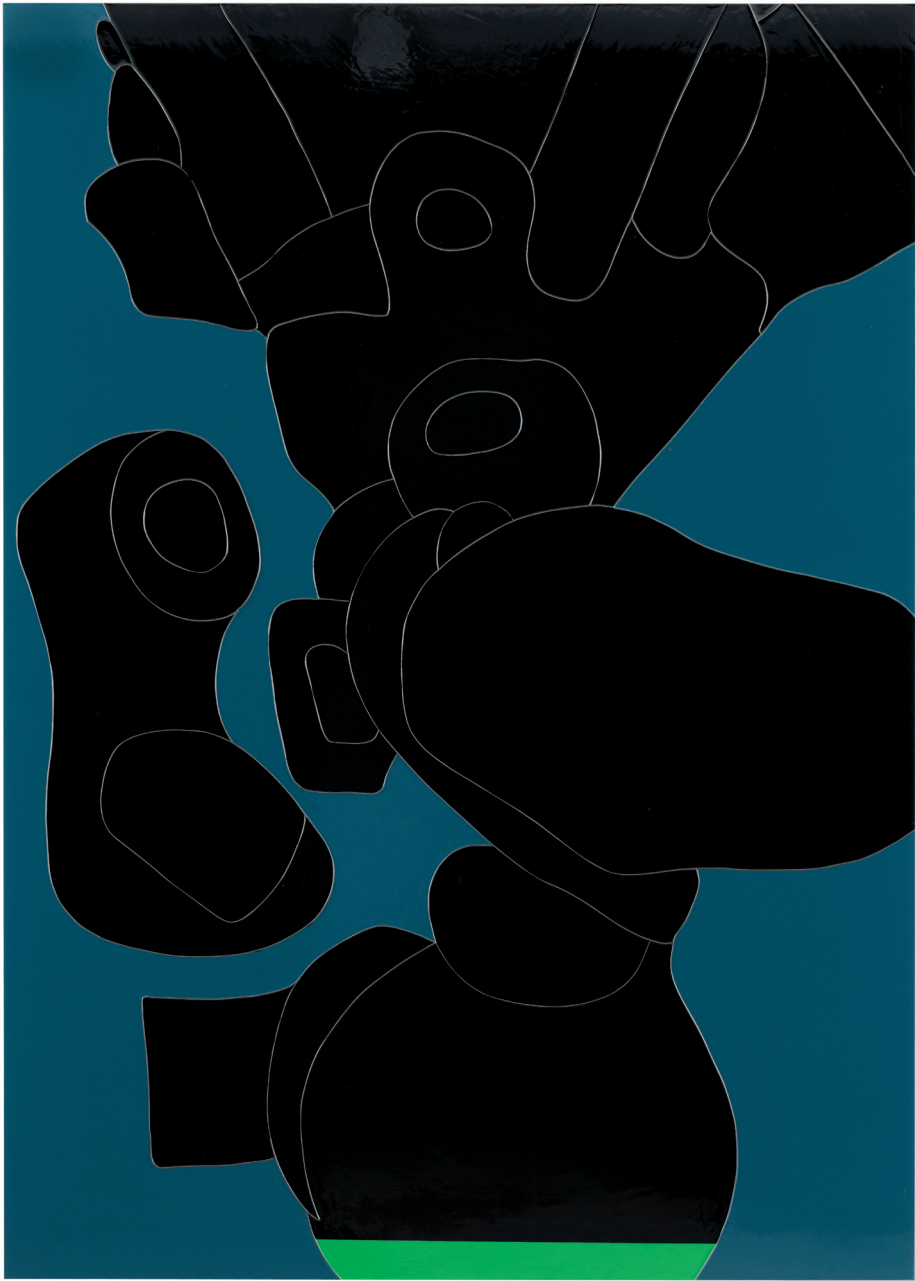


Stripes, 2013
Enamel on aluminum
45½ x 60 inches; 115 x 153 cm





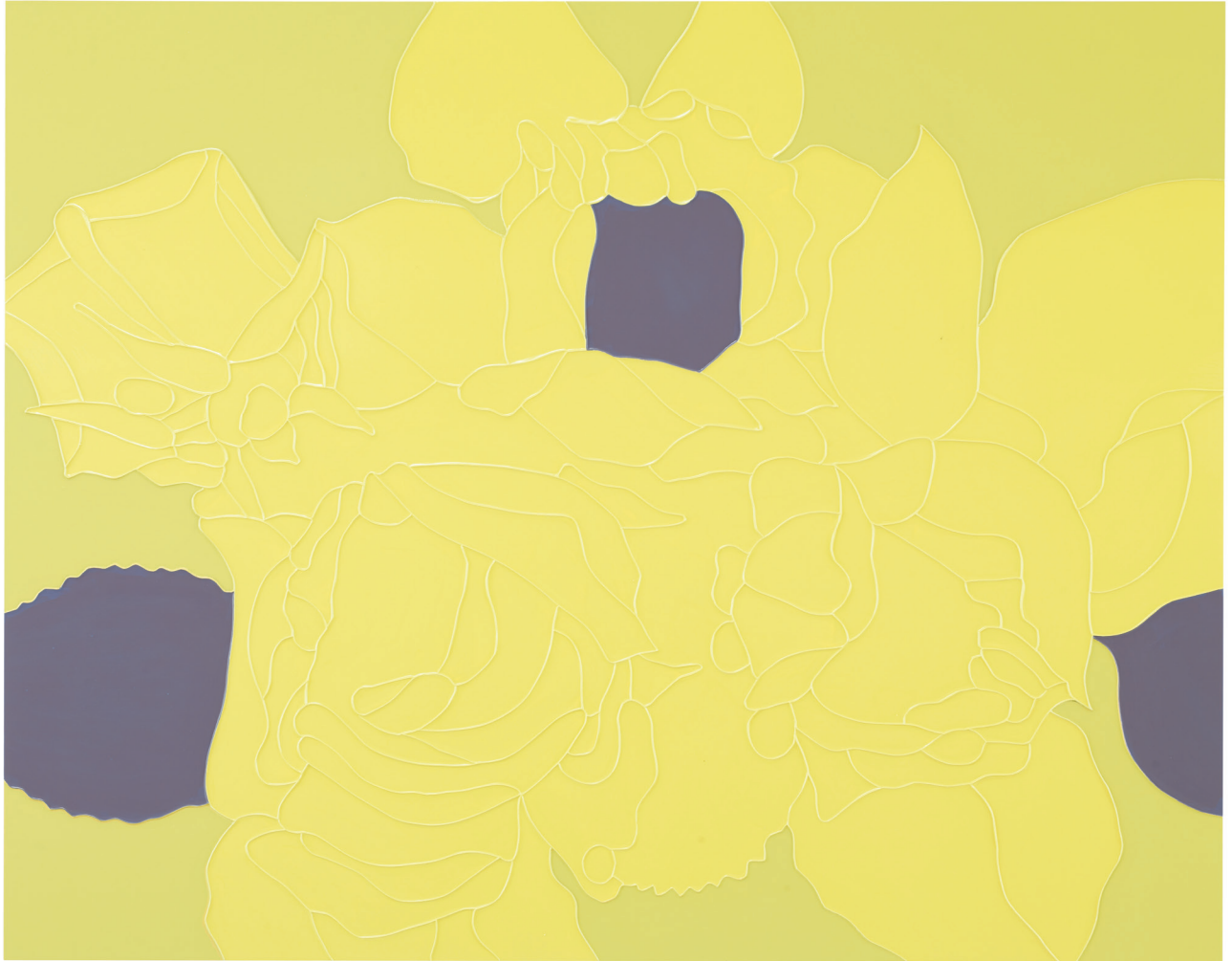
Fetish, 2013
Enamel on aluminum
78 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 55 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches; 199 x 142 cm







Tribute, 2013
Enamel on aluminum
44 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 56 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches; 112 x 143 cm







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Matthew Marks Gallery
523 W 24th Street
New York, NY 10011
www.matthewmarks.com

Jacket: *The Red Meeting the Blue* (detail), 2013

Frontispiece: *The Wonky Wheel (Blue)*, *The Wonky Wheel (Yellow)*,
and *The Wonky Wheel (Red)*, all 2013

Final page: *How to paint a door*, 2013. Gloss painting on modified
gallery door. 125½ x 93 inches; 319 x 236 cm

